

COVERPLAN

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by

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The endpaper map is reproduced from Admiralty Chart No. 1915, with the permission of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office and the Hydrographer of the Navy

CHAPTER ONE

I DO NOT often suffer from bad dreams, but when I do it is usually many hours before I am sufficiently reassured to slumber again. I cannot have been long asleep when I was thus awakened. I forget the precise nature of my dream, but it was about my schooldays. My thoughts wandered. Past recollections drifted lazily through my head. I had always resented the suggestion dear to schoolmasters in my day, that one's schooldays were the happiest of one's life. To me the curtailment of my liberty was a form of corrective treatment which I was prepared to accept as necessary, and the use of the cane was to me a sporting hazard without which life might have been dull. I doubted the sincerity of the masters who prefixed the first stroke with the admonition, "It hurts me as much as it hurts you". What rot—they thoroughly enjoyed it. I was prepared to endure the restraints and hazards of school life, but I had no other thought than to get out into the world.

Then I remembered my interview and being asked why I wanted to enter the Navy. I had a prompt answer to that, it was the quickest way to leave school. The Admirals laughed, and into the Navy I went.

It had been an enjoyable life, and I had had my good luck as well as my bad luck, and had served on most stations. It's strange how one remembers the good things and forgets the long tedious night watches, pacing up and down the quarter deck in the dead hours of the night, rubbing the sleep out of one's eyes. One forgets these things, but I remembered clearly the excitement of the regattas and

the excursions into the hills and marshes of Albania to shoot woodcock and duck. Memory is merciful in that respect.

Then I had been happy in my married life, but it was sad to think of that. We had been kindred spirits and had laughed at the same things and liked the same people. Married life is not easy in the Navy, however, and after the birth of Jonathan we were often separated, but we had contrived to meet whenever we could. What happy recollections I had of stolen moments together when the Fleet visited the South of France and Jill came down to join me. Or the time when we were together for a whole fortnight at Taormina, and gazed together over the Straits of Messina, across to the toe of Italy. Fragrant moments floated through my mind.

The night was still, save for the ticking of my clock, and my thoughts rambled on.

Fragrant moments never to return, but at least no one could take away the memories. I still had Jonathan; a satisfactory son, very like his mother in so many ways. I was very proud of him and looked forward to his return from the Mediterranean fleet. There was not much I had to offer him, however. My little home and garden were too small a limit to his ambitions. I remembered how we had enjoyed sailing together, but somehow that reminded me too much of Jill, more than I could stand, and ever since she was killed I had lost interest in all the things we had so much enjoyed together. Jonathan was still keen on sailing, however, but he had his own friends and invitations to go cruising and ocean racing. It would be wrong for me to stand in his way; he had his own life to live. I had always wanted a daughter, but Jill had wanted a son. It was sad to think that she was no longer here to enjoy her wish. I yawned, turned on the light and reached for my book.

When I woke up it was broad daylight and time to dress. The light was still burning by my bedside and my book had fallen and lay on the floor with its pages crumpled.

It took me an hour and twenty minutes to reach the Admiralty—door to door. Seven minutes to the station, five minutes to wait, fifty-five minutes to Waterloo and between ten and fifteen minutes by bus. Before the war one would have done this by car in half the time, but with the increased price of petrol, this seemed extravagance now. Then there was the return journey. Two hours and twenty minutes every day spent on travelling. Sixteen hours a week, thirty two days each year. I sat in the train and looked at my companions wondering how many of them had worked out this calculation. Veteran business men, they had probably got over that years ago. Travelling up was not so bad; I studied *The Times*. The Persian Oil Dispute occupied the first place. A Committee was being appointed to enquire into the laws of Marriage and Divorce. There were reports that Maclean and Burgess had been seen in the South of France. Road accidents were higher than last year. I scanned the columns.

We drew into Waterloo and were soon bustling and jostling off the platform. No. 76 bus, a walk up Whitehall and I was soon at my desk. 8-54 exactly—it was 8-52 yesterday.

"Good morning Miss Sharp; is the Captain in yet?"

"No, not yet, Sir, but Mr. Houghton has a message for you, I'll tell him you are here."

"Good morning Mr. Houghton. What's this I hear? Is the boss late again?"

"I'm afraid not, Commander, but Captain Thorough-

good has left a message for you. We had to stay on last night till Admiral Jackson returned. The Captain says that he has to go down to Portsmouth today, and won't be in. He wants you to take his place at the Staff meeting."

"Good heavens! But it starts now, doesn't it?"

"No, not till half past. I'll get the signals for you."

I ran rapidly through the bundle of signals and picked out two or three which I discussed with Mr. Houghton. The appropriate files were extracted and I quickly memorised the contents and set off for the staff meeting.

It was a routine affair. Admiral Jackson took the Chair and called for reports.

"Anything from D.N.I., Mackenzie?"

"Nothing special, Sir," I replied. "D.N.I. himself arrives in Washington today. Captain Thoroughgood as you know is attending the enquiry into the explosion at Bedenham. There is a signal from C-in-C. Far East indicating that another Communist offensive is expected in Korea. And there are two which I feel Captain Thoroughgood would like to discuss with you himself. They can wait till tomorrow. I don't think they are urgent. And that's all, Sir."

The various other departments made their reports and the meeting dispersed. I returned to my office and started to wade through the heap of papers in my 'IN' basket. Unlike many Naval officers, who dislike the Admiralty so profoundly, I found this work most interesting. In many ways there is nothing to equal life at sea, but if one is stuck at the Admiralty, one may as well make the best of it. Besides, I wasn't likely to go to sea again, and so I settled in without complaint.

As I ran through the files I came across reports from all over the world. Some were fresh in, just starting their circular tour round the Naval Staff. On these I had to draft a few suitable comments. Every now and then I rang for

Miss Sharp and asked for some previous report to compare with the one before me. Other files were returning to roost and contained the comments of various Staff Divisions. It was interesting to observe that the officers whose opinions one really valued usually just put 'noted', while others spread over one or more sides of foolscap explaining how much they knew about this already.

The door opened.

"Hallo, Jenkins!" Lieut. Jenkins was my assistant. "I thought I was the only one in today. It doesn't take long as a rule for people like you to find out when the skipper is away. What can I do for you? I suppose you want to go to the races."

"Well, Sir, as a matter of fact I was here earlier than usual. I have been up in Plans Division, and what I came to see you about, Sir, is that a Memorial Service is being held tomorrow for Admiral Morgan and we have to detail off one officer."

"Well, whose turn is it?"

"It's yours, Sir. I thought . . ."

"What absolute nonsense. I went to the last one, I know I did."

"Well, Sir, here's the list."

"Well, Jenkins, I can't go anyhow because D.N.I. is away and the Skipper is away, and I've got to stay. What's wrong with Binney? He's got nothing to do. It'll do him good. I don't suppose he's been to Church since he's been here. You can fix him, and then I suggest you come and have lunch at my club."

I liked Jenkins really. There was something about the way he attempted to detail his boss for the Memorial Service that one had to admire. He had been nearly a year with me now, but I really knew very little about him. His views were certainly unorthodox, but he had proved himself an

efficient and reliable subordinate. D.N.I. distrusted him profoundly; but that was not surprising. They were poles apart. Indeed, I would not have chosen Jenkins myself, but I must confess that after a year, instead of disliking him intensely as I had expected, I valued his counsel, and I realised that he had done much to prevent me from becoming too set in my ways. It was time I found out a bit more about this cheerful rascal. I returned to my correspondence.

The next in my basket was a letter to me personally. I opened it, and looking at the end, noted that it was from Admiral Mathews. I wondered what he wanted. I had always admired the Admiral, he was one of those people who had acquired dignity and kindness with years. I had served on his staff sometime before the war. He was a bit of a martinet then, but that was some time ago, I realised. When one looked back, it always seemed as if the war had only lasted about a year. Then I had bumped into the old boy outside my Bank and we had had lunch together. That was about four years ago, shortly after he had retired. There were two children, I remembered, and Lady Mathews had died.

I read the letter curiously. It was an invitation to go and look him up in Essex. I haven't kept the letter, but I remember that at first it seemed rather a long way to go, and then there was something faintly compelling about the way it was written. A suggestion of loneliness. Perhaps it touched a kindred feeling in my own mind. On the other hand I begrudged my week-ends. Since being at the Admiralty I had become immersed in my garden, and if one went away, one never caught up again.

It was only when I came to reply and realised the formidable list of previous engagements I would have to produce to excuse myself between now and the New Year, that I decided to get it over as soon as possible.

This week-end would do perfectly. I had to be back on duty at the Admiralty on Sunday, in any case. That would give me a good excuse for getting away. If I took my car down I could be back by noon the next day, and I would get full marks from the old boy for prompt attention. If I put it off I would probably end by having to stay longer.

I had some difficulty in driving out of London. All my life I seem to have entered or left the Metropolis in a West or South Westerly direction. Once I remembered in a North Westerly direction and several times I had skirted the North Circular road, but as I threaded my way past Fenchurch Street and down the Mile End Road, I passed unfamiliar land-marks. Whitechapel Church, London Hospital, the People's Palace, all caught my eye as I dodged through the crowded traffic. For miles and miles the suburbs continued. Miles and miles of depressing Victorian houses, fire stations, public houses, semi-detached residences flashed by. I had a powerful car and lost no time once I was clear of the traffic.

Speeding down the Colchester Road my thoughts began to range forward. I wondered what had prompted the Admiral to ask me down, and I wondered what he did to occupy his active mind. I could hardly imagine a man of his energy and enterprise just vegetating in the country.

Chelmsford came and went and then I reached Colchester. Last time I had been to Colchester was when my brother had been stationed there. That was many years ago when I was a boy. It's queer how chance sometimes leads you over the same track. I couldn't remember much. I suppose it had changed a good deal, but as I took the road for West Mersea my pulse quickened. The first time I had

ever been sailing was at West Mersea. I must have been about fourteen at the time, but I was at an impressionable age, and even after all these years, every detail stood out in my mind. I instinctively turned down the road I had only once travelled before, and while I was still dwelling in the past I found myself crossing over the Strood on to the Island. It was high water, and the creek looked at its best. I paused to take in the scene. On my left was a pill-box, sited to guard the Causeway, while on the other side was another relic of the war, the half-sunken hull of a small landing craft. I drove on and up over the Island, and soon descended to the water front on the other side.

I recognised the place at once, but there were many more yachts than I had remembered, it must have grown considerably. In fact, the place was studded with small boats at anchor, with here and there larger yachts and fishing smacks. Close on to the roadway, lying securely in mud berths, were a motley collection of hulks. Vessels of all sorts whose days at sea were done, but which now served a useful purpose as house boats. Here and there small rickety little piers had been built out across the fringing marsh, but just before me there was the gravel hard which I remembered, round which the dinghies clustered. I turned to look at the village along the front. The Victory Hotel hadn't changed much, but I could see that quite a number of bungalows and small seaside residences had been added, and several different Yacht Clubs, which I didn't remember, seemed to have sprung up.

There was a smell in the air which you don't get elsewhere. A smell of good black mud.

I must have been there some minutes when I saw a man slouching towards me in sea boots. He wore a peaked cap and a blue sweater with the name *Titania* embroidered in white letters.

"Can you tell me the way to Bligh?" I called out.

"To where?"

"To Bligh," I repeated.

"Oh! Bligh. Well, Sir, if you turn round and face t'other way and goes to the top of the hill, and takes the first turning to the right, fork right, and you'll be right there."

"You don't happen to know a house called 'The Elms', I suppose?"

"No, Sir," he replied, "I don't live in these parts. But if you ask in the Victory, they'd know there."

I thanked the man and decided to get to Bligh first and ask there. Following his directions I soon found myself in what must have been an old village dating back many years before all these new bungalows started going up. This was much more the sort of place Admiral Mathews would choose.

Two old crones were gossiping over their hedge and I drew up and asked again.

"The Elms? The Elms? Mabel, there's a gentleman as wants The Elms."

"I am looking for Admiral Mathews' house," I interrupted.

"Oh! The Admiral. Yes, I know 'im. That's 'is 'ouse beyond the Church by them large clump of trees—a gentleman 'e is."

I thanked the pair and driving on swung in at what was something between a rough gravel drive and a cart track, with an iron fence on one side and a tall yew hedge on the other. About fifty yards off the road stood the house.

It was really just what I had pictured. Painted white, with a tiled roof and ponies grazing in the little paddock opposite, the place had a character of its own. A cedar spread its flat branches and cast its shadow over the well-kept lawns that fronted the porch.

I climbed out, stretched myself and rang. The door opened and I was greeted by a smart-looking man servant.

"Good evening, Sir. The Admiral's expecting you. I'll take you through to the garden."

"I think we've met before," I said, but before I could continue I was cut short with a broad grin and a "Yessir, I was with the Admiral in the *Revenge* when you was there."

"Yes, of course, you're Platt. I remember. How very nice to see that you're still looking after the Admiral. And tell me, how is Sir Charles these days?"

"Well Sir, 'e's very cheerful, but I'm afraid 'e's none too good really. Since 'e retired 'e's just lived for sailing, and now the doctor's said 'e mustn't go sailing no more, and that's upset 'im dreadful. But your coming, Sir, will cheer 'im up no end. I'll lead the way. The young ladies are down with the boat, but they should be back at any moment."

Passing through the hall there was no mistaking the nautical flavour. A large lamp shade caught my eye, made from an Admiralty chart. While over the fireplace was an attractive water colour of a *gozo* boat with Malta in the distance.

"The Admiral is in the garden, Sir," continued Platt as he showed me through the conservatory, which, instead of flowers and seed boxes, contained a work bench and a partly completed model of a ship of the line, and at the far end some sails hung up to dry.

As soon as I emerged onto the lawn, Sir Charles rose from the garden seat at the far end and came to meet me. I could see at once that he had aged considerably. He walked slowly with a stick, and the slanting rays of the evening sun caught his grey hair, giving him at once the appearance of dignified old age. He had always been dignified, and even in his

greeting he managed to convey genuine warmth of feeling without being effusive.

"Well, it is good of you to come all this way, David. I hadn't really expected you to make a special trip, you know, but just hoped that I might lure you in some time or other when you were visiting these parts. It is good to see you, and now tell me all about yourself. One soon gets out of touch, and I don't go up to town much these days. I really find there's so much to do down here. Come, let's go in and warm ourselves with a drink."

"Well, Sir," I replied, as soon as I had a chance. "It was very nice of you to suggest my coming down. I had been meaning to invite myself, but it's extraordinary how one's week-ends get booked up," I added rather insincerely. "When I got your letter, I thought I had better strike while the iron was hot. I'm supposed to be going over to Ireland for my Easter leave, and I realised that I might not have another chance for some time. I'm glad to see you still have Platt with you."

"Yes. I don't know what I would do without Platt, he's a loyal soul. Let me see," he continued, brandishing a bottle, "aren't you one of these modern sailors who can't take their gin without something to drown the taste? Well, help yourself, you'll need something after your drive. And how long did you take coming down? Cornering on two wheels most of the way, I suppose, like a young Sub-Lieutenant."

I laughed. "I'm a very cautious driver, Sir, but I must confess I got down in quite good time. I left about half-past one. I thought it would take longer to find your house. I went down to West Mersea and asked there, and it was really much easier than I expected. It's years since I visited this part of the world. It hasn't really changed so much."

"Did you see the *Fame*?"

"The what?"

"Oh, I have a boat down there, she lies just off the jetty. I thought you might have noticed her." There was the faintest note of disappointment in his voice. "I must get the girls to take you down later. Meanwhile, I'd better get Platt to organise your luggage and show you up to your room."

"How are the children, Sir?" I enquired. "They must be getting quite grown up. It's a long time since I've seen them. Last time we met I remember pushing Juliet up into a tree and she got an awful scolding from her Nanny. It was really meant for me, I think."

"Oh, they're both very well, David, I'm glad to say. They'll be most indignant if they hear you calling them children. Won't they, Platt?"

"What's that, Sir?"

"Never mind, but will you look after my guest. The dinghy can rough it outside for the night, that will leave room for the Commander's car in the garage. And then there is his luggage."

"Very Good, Sir," said Platt.

Then I expect, David, you would like to see your room."

I followed Platt upstairs. I might have been staying at Admiralty House. My clothes were already unpacked, and a jug of hot water stood in the basin.

"If you want me at any time, Sir, there's a voice-pipe beside the bed. This used to be the Admiral's room. There's a whistle at the bottom end if you blow."

I washed my hands and made a quick reconnaissance of the room. I am rather like a cat when I am in a new house. I always take the first opportunity to look round. First the books and pictures, then out of the window and finally the cupboards. But there was nothing outstanding. Some senior officers when they retire seem to give way to years of

pent-up eccentricity and have their houses bristling with bunks, portholes and gangways, but apart from the communication system Sir Charles seemed to have restrained himself tolerably well. I was glad of that. I always feel embarrassed to hear brother officers referring to the star-board side of the tennis court, or the deck when they mean the floor.

When I came down the chatter of feminine voices and laughter greeted me. The girls had just returned and were standing talking excitedly to their father. They appeared at once older and more responsible than I had expected, and both wore oilskin jackets, blue serge trousers and sea boots. A hush descended as I approached and the taller of the girls came forward and shook me by the hand.

"You, I presume, are Juliet," I said.

"Yes, that's right, and this is Susan," she replied, turning to her sister.

"How do you do," I said to Susan, who was obviously feeling suddenly shy.

"We've been having an argument," said Juliet, coming to her sister's rescue. "Susan says that the car we saw down by the jetty must have been yours, and we've got a shilling on it."

"Well, I think Susan wins," I replied, noticing that she was inclined to blush, "but I'm afraid I didn't see you. I must say you both seem to have grown a good deal since we last met. The last thing I remember of you, Juliet, was getting a good ticking off from your old Nanny for climbing trees in your party frock, and Susan I think was a little girl with pig-tails."

"Yes," she said, "that was a long time ago, and you were very mean and ran as soon as you heard Nanny coming."

There was one of those slightly embarrassed pauses until their father said, "Well, I suggest you two girls take

Commander Mackenzie and show him the *Fame*. If I remember he used to be rather keen on sailing. It won't take long and we needn't have supper till eight. I expect you'd like to stretch your legs, David?"

"I would very much like to look at your yacht," I replied. "But aren't you coming too?"

"No," he replied. "I am in trouble with my back. I think I had better stay behind."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Sir. I hope it's nothing much."

"Oh, no, I don't think so, but it's best to be careful at my age."

There was another silence and Juliet turned to me and said, "Have you got your sea boots?" And quickly added, "Well, borrow Daddy's, they're in the porch. I expect they will fit."

We set off across the fields and in about twenty minutes emerged on to the saltings. Walking along them we soon came to the hard from the opposite direction to that from which I had approached in my car.

"We can borrow Major Dugdale's dinghy. I'm sure he won't mind," said Juliet. "I don't think he's back, and ours is rather high up the beach."

I got in and the girls shoved, but we stuck. "I'm afraid you'll have to get out," said Juliet, "she's on the mud."

So we all shoved and scrambled in one after the other. "Damn," said Susan, who was last in over the bows of the frail craft. "I'm sorry, but my boot's got full."

In a few deft strokes Juliet had the dinghy bumping gently alongside a grey yacht. I hadn't noticed her when I first came down because she was beyond a rather smart-looking black ketch, which had obscured her from where I had been standing.

"Here we are then," said Juliet. "~~The~~"

We climbed over the side and the girls remained silent while I momentarily took stock. She was a handy-looking vessel. No use for racing, I imagined, but just the sort of boat for cruising about in these parts.

The girls said something, but I forget what it was. We slid back the hatch and descended by a short steep ladder into the saloon where I was assailed by a musty smell of damp cushions, varnish, Stockholm tar and bilge water. My mind flashed back thirty years. It all seemed so familiar. Like a dream. "You clumsy idiot," I remembered my brother saying because I had lost a couple of spoons overboard when I emptied the bucket.

And then there was the occasion when we had sailed off and nearly lost our dinghy because I hadn't secured it properly. How clearly it all came back to me. I suppose it was because I had been so eager to impress, but it was the faults and errors that seem to have stuck most in my mind. There was a fine black fishing smack I remembered, which had got under way just as we did, and we raced her to the bar. Without thinking I sprang up on deck to see if she was still there. But we must have been anchored in a different place then. The smell of the mud in the still evening air was just as I remembered it. A curlew trilled somewhere overhead. . . . I came out of my dream to find Susan speaking in a somewhat anxious voice at my side.

"What do you think of her?"

I realised that she had hardly spoken up till now, and I roused myself.

"Oh, I think she's first rate," I replied hastily. "You must be immensely proud of her. I suppose you are both very fond of sailing."

"Well, we are really. We're both very keen. Do you think you could take us out tomorrow?" I suppose my face

must have fallen slightly, for she quickly added, "Did Daddy say anything about it to you?"

At that moment Juliet emerged with a bottle of rum and a tumbler. "I'm sure a tot would do you good."

"Well, my goodness!" I said. "You certainly seem to have studied the art of persuasion at an early age. I hope you two aren't in the habit of doing this. The next thing you'll tell me is that you chew tobacco. No, I won't have any rum, thank you, and I'm afraid that in any case as far as sailing is concerned, I simply have to return to London tomorrow. No matter how much rum you pour out, I have to be back at the Admiralty. I hadn't really had much time to talk to your father, but what was it he was supposed to say?"

"Well," said Juliet, "as you probably know, since Daddy retired and settled here, all he thought about was sailing. Most of his friends were too busy to go with him and so the two of us usually acted as crew. We should have been going to some finishing school, I suppose, but—well, Susan and I preferred sailing and we wanted to help Daddy. Then last winter, you see, Daddy's arthritis got much worse. He was laid up for nearly two months, and now the doctor says that he must stop sailing. It's very sad for all of us really, as we get on so well together."

"And we've had such happy cruises," put in Susan.

"We will have to sell *Fame* I suppose, but when we discussed this with Daddy he was very keen for us to keep her on, anyhow for one or two more summers, and get someone to take us out. You see, Daddy felt that it really wasn't very safe for the two of us to take her out alone, but Sue and I get rather bored just pottering about for the day, and the trouble is we don't really know any men."

"We could manage her, of course," interjected Sue.

". . . but she would be rather a handful if it came on to

blow hard," continued Juliet. "And then Daddy thought of getting in touch with you in the hope that you might care to—er—go for a cruise. We thought perhaps he'd mentioned it."

"I'm sure you are much too busy really," said Susan. "You must have lots of things to do, but we couldn't really remember how keen you were. Do you remember that picnic you took us on up at Wei Hai Wei in Daddy's galley, and we went round to a lovely sandy bay, I forget what it was called, and we tried to catch fish with a seine net? Who else was with us then?"

"I think we had better be getting back," said Juliet.

"Yes, indeed, I remember that picnic, and the seine net got caught in a rock and we pulled and pulled, and got back very late. I forget who we had with us. It must have been the Doctor. I can't remember his name now, and the Flag Lieutenant, I suppose. What's happened to him these days? He's the man to take you sailing," I said without thinking.

"Poor Flags, that's a sad story," said Juliet. "When we left China he went into the Fleet Air Arm, and was one of the first pilots shot down in the war. That's the trouble really, almost everyone we knew seems to have been killed."

By the time we reached the house again, the conversation had changed and we were discussing ponies. In the winter I gathered their chief occupation was riding. Juliet was really almost as fond of riding as she was of sailing, but for Susan it was more a means of keeping fit, I think.

Just before we went into supper, Susan said in a low voice, "Perhaps we shouldn't have mentioned your coming sailing, you won't say anything to Daddy about it, will

you?" She looked up at me with two solemn eyes, but just at that moment her father came in.

Conversation at the table was rather stilted, and I felt a slightly strained atmosphere had developed. I was aware that the two girls, who had seemed to throw off their self-consciousness while we were on board, now seemed rather silent. Perhaps it was an illusion, but now that they had changed out of their sailing clothes into ordinary female attire, they seemed to have become awkward and restrained.

Soon afterwards they made their excuses and retired to bed, and I was left with the Admiral. I remembered what Susan had said and valiantly struck up some reminiscences about the China station. I must say, considering what I had been told by his daughters, I thought he was amazingly cheerful, and I couldn't help wondering whether, when I started to creak and crack up, I would be as philosophical.

"It's awfully good of you to come all this way," he repeated. "It has cheered me up no end talking about old times. They were good days when one looks back. I am sorry you can't stay longer, the girls will be disappointed."

I was afraid he was going to press me on the matter of sailing, but really I couldn't just desert my garden and all my other pursuits. I quickly joined in by saying how surprised I was to find that they had nearly grown up, and what attractive girls they had become.

"They miss their mother," he rejoined. "Instead of packing them off to their dances in their party frocks, they've been crewing for me in the *Fame*, and now when I suggest taking them to town, they say they would rather be scraping the bottom of the boat, or that the rigging needs blacking down. And if anyone comes to call, I can't find them anywhere. They seem to have squared Platt completely. He tells them when anyone's coming up the drive,

I fancy. Anyway, it's astonishing how they disappear. I've been meaning to have some of the shrubbery cut down, but apparently Platt's against it. None of his business, really, I can't think how he got to hear about it. You know, David my boy, it's no good giving orders in your own house. You've got to be far more subtle."

"Well, I admit Susan was a bit shy, Sir, but I thought Juliet dealt with me very confidently when I arrived; and when we went down to the boat they both became very companionable. Unfortunately I never had any daughters myself, I always wish I had. But, Sir, I'm sure most girls are shy at that age, I really don't think you have much to worry about. If I were you I would be far more worried about them marrying off and leaving me alone."

"I think they felt at ease with you in some way, David. Of course, they remember you as a sort of Uncle when you were on my staff. However, it's getting late now, and if you've got to drive all the way back, I expect you'd like an early night."

I awoke in the morning with a fearful start, wondering what on earth had disturbed me, but all was quiet. Presently there was a shrill whistle right in my ear, and I realised it was that infernal voice-pipe, and the faithful Platt giving me a preliminary call. A sepulchral voice enquired whether I would like a bath before or after the Admiral. There was a muffled shouting at the other end while he was presumably getting through to the Admiral on the other line. Then the same reverberation up the tube, and I gathered that the Admiral would go first.

Breakfast was not an easy meal under the circumstances. I felt I had been rather a disappointment and the Admiral probably felt he had brought me down a long way and

offered me little in return. I was genuinely sorry for him, and was wondering when I said good-bye, what I really ought to do about it. Then I remember shaking hands all round, and Susan looking up at me rather pathetically I thought, as she asked if there was any chance of my taking them out, perhaps later on in the summer; and being rather shut up by her father reminding her that I must have many other engagements. However, I promised to let them know if I could manage it, and was soon speeding on my way back to London.

It was a sad little group who waved to me as I left, but I didn't really see why I should sacrifice my leave just to amuse these girls. Surely they could find someone more suitable.

Back at the Admiralty I soon found myself glancing through signal after signal that had been brought to me. Some I discussed with the duty Captain, others necessitated a telephone call, but most I left to wait till they could be dealt with by the appropriate departments on the Monday.

I yawned and walked over to the window and peered out over Trafalgar Square. The starlings were jostling for position along the ledge, and every now and again the pigeons rose up in a great covey and circled round before seeking somewhere to roost. In the streets below life was still teeming as dusk fell, and my thoughts wandered off to the salt marshes. There was something rather drab about the scene before me. Away down below some soap-box orator was addressing the crowd. I couldn't hear what he said, but the sight of this and the people bustling on the pavements and the ceaseless noise of the traffic contrasted with the solitude of the mud flats I had so recently visited. It was like visiting another planet. Even the birds were different. I turned back to the office and switched on the light and was soon immersed again in my signals.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS one of those warm fine summers and I was glad to get out of London at the week-ends. In my leisure time I worked industriously at my garden. I had never been particularly interested in this hobby before, because just as one got things straight, one was always moved on, then someone else got the benefit. But since coming to the Admiralty, I had bought this cottage with its little garden and in the course of two years had become wholly absorbed in what was for me a new and fascinating pastime.

It was a still, fine evening as I strolled around examining my handiwork. The new roses I had put in had done remarkably well their first year. The rose has always been my favourite flower, and I was glad to find the garden already well stocked, and I believed in letting them grow into good substantial bushes. Many years ago someone had said: "Spare the knife and spoil the rose," and ever since gardeners great and small seem to have been ruthlessly hacking them to the ground, meanwhile the humble cottage rose, not menaced by scateurs, thrived to become a by-word, and people wondered why.

I sat down on the garden seat. The midges were just beginning to buzz round my head, and I lit my pipe to drive them off. I suddenly remembered I had a letter from Jonathan which I had stuffed in my pocket. I pulled it out and began reading.

It was written from the Greek anchorage of Skiathos,

where the Fleet regatta had just been held. Jonathan had been in the gunroom gig which had finished a close second. The Fleet was about to return to Malta. Otherwise there was nothing much. Jonathan was keen to get home. He enjoyed himself and seemed to get on well with the other Midshipmen, but three years abroad is a long time for a youngster, and he already looked forward to getting back the year after next with a great longing. I thought of his sailing, and my mind turned to my short visit to Sir Charles and the *Fame*.

It's a pity Jonathan wasn't coming home this summer, I thought. I felt a bit guilty about Sir Charles. I had the feeling that he badly wanted me to take his daughters out in the *Fame*, and that I had raised his hopes by coming down so quickly after his invitation. I wouldn't have minded sailing with my contemporaries, or if I had been asked, to make up an amusing party in some larger yacht perhaps at Cowes. But really to go off mud larking in the Essex creeks in rather a humble looking vessel and with two girls, was asking quite a lot. I must have disappointed him though. He was too dignified, too proud perhaps, to show what he felt, but thinking it over I began to realise what I should have felt if I had been in his position. This weather, moreover, would be perfect for a cruise, I reflected.

It was getting late and I went in and wrote to Sir Charles suggesting that I might come down for a few days during my summer leave. That was the best I could do for him. It was only a fortnight to go now and it would just coincide with the off-season of my roses. It is strange how one's life is sometimes affected by little things. Quite possibly, he would have got someone else by now, but in any case my mind would feel easier.

A few days later I got a charming reply, and felt glad I had written. He was so delighted I could come, and Juliet

and Susan were already eagerly discussing and planning a cruise. Even Platt had apparently approved. So that was that.

By the next mail I got a letter from Susan saying how much the two of them were looking forward to my visit, and asking me to bring down, presumably borrowed from the Admiralty, Charts No. 325 and 192, and also the North Sea Pilot, Volume IV.

During the next few days I rummaged about among my kit in search of oilskins, sweaters, sou'westers and other clothing suitable for sailing. I had not, I recalled, done a great deal of yachting in England, and wondered what I should really need. In the end I decided to limit myself to two suitcases, and what I could carry over my arm; and in this condition I duly set off.

When I arrived at Bligh, I was warmly greeted by the Admiral, who explained that the girls were already on board getting things ready, and that I was to go down as soon as I arrived. I remained, however, talking to him for a while, discussing the weather, instructions for getting down stream and a number of other practical details which have now escaped my mind.

"It's very good of you to do this, and I am very grateful. I only hope you have a good cruise. And," he added, "mind you keep the girls in order and make them do the work. You'll find they're a good crew, and I hope you'll find they are good companions. We've always got on well together and have had happy days in the old *Fame*. I am only sorry I'm not coming along too."

When I got down to the Hard it was nearly high water, and as I got out of my car I met Juliet bringing down a load of bread.

"I'm so glad you are able to come," she said. "We are almost ready to slip. We thought we would take advantage

of this tide and drop down to Mersea quarters further out. It's so much easier by day, and then we can be free to come and go as we please. How about your baggage?" And then, catching sight of my two suitcases, "Oh! well, then we had better make two trips. We generally use kitbags as they are easier to stow."

I felt duly reproved. However, with skilful balancing and a heavily loaded dinghy, we managed in one trip without upsetting. Somehow my suitcases seemed to be much bigger than when I started.

As we drew alongside Susan came on deck with a cheerful greeting, but she too viewed my suitcases with some doubt. In the end I unpacked one and transferred the contents of the other into a sail bag. The offending suitcases were then put ashore. This certainly seemed to leave more room in the saloon, and I started to change into my sailing clothes. While I was doing this, Juliet came down in quest of a marline spike, and quite unabashed at finding me only half clad, proceeded to explain that there was a special cupboard over by the mast for hanging up one's shore clothes.

"If there's not room," she said, "throw out some of the oilskins. They are not supposed to be there, anyway. I expect they are Susan's, but if you look around there should be some proper coat-hangers." With that she disappeared, and I continued changing.

When I came up from below, I was surprised to find Susan at the wheel and the yacht gliding silently down harbour under a single large jib. A light evening breeze off the shore kept this well filled, and we were making good way past the other yachts and boats in the creek. I was struck by the silent efficiency with which this seemed to have been accomplished. I had expected that all hands would be needed for getting under way in a yacht of this

size, and had somehow imagined myself taking charge, but this didn't look much like it.

"Hullo," said Susan as I emerged, "I hear I've left you no room in the cupboard. I'm sorry, but I hope you've managed."

"Oh, there's plenty of room," I replied. "I'm afraid that I brought too much, really, but it's all stowed now. I hadn't realised you were under way."

"Well, we thought we might as well get moving," she replied. "It's nearly two hours after high water and we draw nearly five feet. It wouldn't leave much over the bar if we had waited. We're just coming to it now. Perhaps you'd like to help Juliet up forward with the anchor."

As I moved forward I recalled the last time I had got under way in my destroyer. With the First Lieutenant and the 'Chief' reporting the ship ready for sea, and my leisurely ascent to the bridge to take charge. Very different from this I thought, and then there were the Admiral's parting words, "Keep the girls in order, you'll find they make a good crew." It seemed as if I was the crew.

When I reached Juliet she turned to me and said, "It's all ready for letting go now, all you have to do is to wait till Susan sings out and then ease off the brake here. I should give her about one and a half shackles, but don't let it run out in a heap. If you can do this it will be a great help and I will go below and start getting something to eat." And with that she disappeared down the fore hatch.

A cry of "let go" brought me to my senses and in a moment the light cable was rattling out over the stem. As I applied the brake again the little yacht spun round and was soon lying quietly at anchor. And while I secured the fore sail, Susan disappeared below and presently reappeared with the riding light which she hoisted up on the fore stay.

"You might watch this for a bit," she said, "it's inclined

to burn up when it gets warm, and start smoking."

Left to myself, I began looking round. It was a beautiful evening, with a red glow where the sun had set. The place where we had anchored was about a mile and a half off shore, and the lights from the houses among the trees along the waterfront were reflected in the oily surface of the water. I noticed the tide was sluicing past at a goodly rate, and every now and then some weed or other flotsam went sailing by on its voyage out to sea. Away to the South a large round moon was beginning to cast its silvery light. As I looked along its path reflected in the sea, I could discern the edge of a great bank of mud exposed by the falling tide not far away, looking like a long thin shadow along the horizon. I was beginning to experience a distinct thrill at being away on our own. Away from the bustling humanity, the city cries and the noise of motor horns. The only sounds to disturb the solitude here were the preparations going on below, the lapping of the tide under the bow of the dinghy, and far away the piping of some lone marsh bird.

It was quite dark now, and growing chilly. I shivered, and started to descend into the saloon. It presented a warm and cosy scene, and a delicious smell of frying bacon greeted my nostrils. Soon the three of us were seated round the table enjoying to the full a simple but adequate meal. After which we sat in the soft light of the lamp and discussed plans.

"Commander Mackenzie," said Juliet, "you know Sue and I are very grateful to you for coming out with us. You see, there was no one else we could very well ask."

"Well," I replied, "its very pleasant here; as far as I am concerned I am enjoying myself already and am very much looking forward to this sail. But having seen how you handle this little ship, I should have thought you could have managed perfectly well on your own."

"Oh, well," said Juliet, "we were quite keen to do that, but Daddy didn't like the idea. It would, of course, be quite easy in fine weather, but if one got caught in a blow one would really need more than two to shorten sail. But we do hope you will enjoy the cruise. She's quite a good boat in many ways, and although she's a bit old-fashioned compared with some of these modern yachts, she sails extremely well, and I believe she's a good deal more comfortable than many of them."

"What's her history?" I asked.

"Oh, Daddy was rather clever really, and managed to pick her up amazingly cheap during the middle of the war. She was built originally for fishing, but before she was completed she was converted into a yacht. That was just before the war. She is in very good condition. The only alteration we've made was to put in this coal stove. A lot of people don't like them because they make a bit of a mess on deck and the sails get dirty, but we've had ours tanned and it makes all the difference when it's cold and wet. It's the only way to keep dry below."

"I must say it makes it very snug now," I replied. "I'm afraid I rather like my creature comforts. Your father, of course, was remarkable to go on doing this at his age. I'm afraid I will fall far short of his standards when it comes to roughing it. I'm surprised that while you were looking round, you didn't pick on someone a bit younger, or someone who knew a bit more about cruising in these parts."

"We did think about that," said Juliet, "but Daddy seemed to think that someone of your age would be safer."

"I see," I replied, wondering how old I appeared to these young girls. I was glad I was considered safe anyhow.

This was perhaps just as well, as there is not over much

accommodation in a ten-tonner, with a single saloon and focsle forward. These two were children when I last knew them, and it was only now that I began to realise that they were, in fact, grown up.

Since my wife's death, I had rather avoided female company. Juliet and Susan, however, were more like boys in outlook, and I could quite see how their father found them such good sailing companions. They were certainly completely natural in their attitude towards me. The cosy atmosphere of the saloon, with the gentle motion rocking the boat, and the occasional slatting of the halliards against the mast seemed to banish any shyness on their part, and I suppose I began to thaw a bit too. Anyhow, we continued talking till well into the night.

When at length we began to feel drowsy and I looked round to see where we would sleep, I realised that the accommodation might indeed have been more suitable. In the focsle was one rather uncomfortable looking tip up 'pipe bunk', which appeared to be in use as a sail rack. While in the saloon there were two settees on which we were sitting, and two folding bunks, which could be let down. I was just wondering whether I was to be relegated to the dampness of the focsle, when Juliet announced the arrangements for the night. This placed me in the starboard settee while the girls accommodated themselves on the other side, Susan forward and Juliet aft, and the spare jib, thank goodness, remained on the focsle bunk. I suppose those who sail a lot don't worry about these things. Doubtless they have other and more important matters to think about. Anyhow, the bunk allotted to me seemed dry and comfortable and the saloon warm; while the focsle looked damp and uninviting, and the smell of mud off the cable within a few inches of one's head was not a thing I had particularly relished. I was glad I was considered 'safe' after all, it had

its compensations. It was not long before we had turned in and were fast asleep.

The following morning I was awakened at the early hour of six by shouts on deck and the noise of splashing in the water. On going up, however, I found this was the girls having an early morning dip. I noticed at once that the weather had changed. The fine still evening had given place to a grey and cheerless morning, and a fresh wind was coming in from the South. As far as I was concerned, not the morning for a dip, and I was glad to get below and change into something warmer than my pyjamas. Rather as I expected, the barograph was beginning to fall. However, it took more than that to deter the girls. Looking flushed and invigorated by their bathe, they were eager to get under way as soon as breakfast was finished.

"But Uncle David," said Susan, in answer to my doubts, "if we never took a chance on the weather we would never get anywhere. It probably is going to breeze up, but we shall be quite snug with one reef, and when we get outside we can see how it goes. Our plan is to work to the South. You can see from the chart¹ it's fairly sheltered to begin with, and we can always run back into the Blackwater if the wind backs. Or else with the falling tide we can shelter under Buxey Sand if we want to. There is quite a good place at the North end of the Ray Sand channel which we often use."

By half past seven we were under way and standing out to sea. With a reefed mainsail and single headsail we made good progress. But as we cleared the Blackwater we came out into the full force of the wind and began to lay over till the lee deck was awash. Every now and then, as we

¹ End-paper.

plunged into a short sea, the spray was blown sharply back into our faces. Susan was at the wheel obviously enjoying every moment. From the shelter of the hatchway I watched her with interest. Peering continuously up to windward, she seemed in some effortless way to counter the plunging and rolling of the vessel. Every now and then when the spray came stinging across, she would give a quick duck with her head and catch it with her sou'wester instead of in the face. From time to time the ship gave an extra heavy lurch to leeward.

"How's it going?" I sang out, trying not to sound apprehensive.

"Oh, fine," she replied, "we can practically make the Wallet Spitway on this tack. I wonder if you could hand up a towel to put round my neck, and ask Juliet if she can come up presently."

When Juliet appeared I listened to the two girls discussing the prospects. It was obvious to me that they knew the Thames with all its complicated system of shoals and channels by heart. I tried to follow what they were saying with the aid of the chart, and gathered that they were calculating whether or not there would be enough water over the Wallet Spitway. In the end they seemed to make up their minds, by some process of mutual understanding, and we tacked. After that, Juliet came down and explained to me that we were now standing in towards the Ray Sand Channel, and would be anchoring in about half an hour.

Concealing a slight feeling of relief at the first sign of prudence I had noticed, I asked what I could do.

"The best plan," said Juliet, "would be for you to take the wheel. Then Susan and I can get ready on the focsle."

When I took over from Susan she handed me a folded and rather sodden chart and pointed out a number of marks and buoys. "I can't see Buxey Beacon yet," she said, "but

when we do I want to anchor about a mile to the north of it. We may have to tack again. As we get near I will be taking a few soundings with the lead, and I'll sing out to you to luff up into wind when I want to."

I found the *Fame* remarkably easy to handle considering that quite a fresh breeze was blowing. I had only a vague idea where we were, but I noticed Susan with her arm round the weather rigging scanning the horizon to windwards, while far away out to sea I could see the smoke of steamers in one of the main channels. Presently we passed a red and white can buoy. I couldn't see the name on it, but we passed close enough to disturb a shag which rose heavily, circled round, and then winged its way out to sea.

"There it is," cried Susan presently, pointing up into the wind. "You'll have to make one or two tacks. we've been set down to leeward."

Every now and then in response to the cry of "Luff", I spun the wheel over and brought *Fame* up into the wind, while Susan took a sounding with the lead. Then, paying off again on the same tack, we continued our course. As we got closer in, the water got calmer, and I could see away to windward a long low stretch of grey sand or mud. We tacked three times on instructions from Susan, and then ran up into the wind and anchored. In next to no time the two girls were lowering the sails and securing them.

It seemed a desolate sort of place to anchor, but I was surprised to find how sheltered it really was. There was practically nothing in sight except the low sand bank to the South and the beacon which I realised must be the Buxey itself. While just discernable away to the West, was what I took to be Denghie Flats, a dreary expanse of mud. It was beginning to rain, and the visibility was none too good, which made our little ship seem very small and far from anywhere.

"We shall be all right here, I think," said Susan. "It doesn't look much of a place, but it's really rather a convenient anchorage for this sort of occasion, and fortunately not many people use it."

As if to belie her words, however, we both saw a largeish vessel standing in towards us. Susan reached for the binoculars and studied her for a moment. Then leaning over the open skylight, called out, "Juliet, the *Dragonfly* is coming in."

Juliet quickly popped her head up and took a look. "That's good," she said. "If she anchors anywhere near we can put the dinghy over and go across. We have some friends over there," she added, addressing herself to me as if in explanation.

It was difficult to make out much as the incoming vessel was approaching almost end on, but as she got near and sailed past, I could see her better. She was a handsome looking yacht, built on modern lines. A good deal bigger than *Fame* to look at and much smarter in appearance. I couldn't see much of the people on board, but her black hull with a gold line near the rail looked well kept. She was a yawl, and had her sails sheeted hard in, and I realised that she was in fact proceeding mainly on her motor. As I watched her she came up to within about half a mile to seaward of where we lay, and then anchored. I felt reassured by this, it seemed to make the place a little less lonely, and the fact that other yachts, anyhow occasionally, used this remote anchorage in this sort of weather was a comforting thought. If the girls went over, I contemplated, it would give me a good chance to have a wash. One of us, in any case, I presumed, would have to remain on board.

It was not long before the girls were climbing into the dinghy ready to go across.

"You might keep an occasional look out," shouted Susan

as they pulled clear. "There's nothing much to worry about until the sands cover, but if it freshens up unexpectedly we might have a bit of a job getting back. I don't suppose we will, but if you think we are getting carried down wind, perhaps you could weigh and come and pick us up."

This disturbing possibility hadn't occurred to me, but it was too late now, as they were already more or less out of hailing distance. "I hope you won't be long," I shouted after them, and went below where, with the aid of a bucket, I contrived to wash. I felt more civilised after that and lay on my bunk smoking. Every now and then I put my head up and looked round and noticed with some apprehension that the wind showed signs of increasing. However, my misgivings were presently dispelled when I saw that the girls were being towed back by the *Dragonfly's* motor dinghy. As they came near, I wondered what their friend was like, but he slipped them without coming on board and with a cheery wave to me returned to his vessel.

I enquired after their visit and was informed that they often met the *Dragonfly*. She was a beautiful ship which they much envied, and was owned by a fellow called Maitland, or part owned, at any rate. He had a friend called Batt who always accompanied him, and they thought that he probably shared the yacht, or maybe shared the expense of running her. The girls explained that they believed in visiting other craft when the chance offered, as there was always much in common with those who went in for proper cruising. They liked Maitland in particular, whom they regarded as an experienced and enterprising yachtsman. He was, I gathered, generally afloat long before and long after most other yachts were securely laid up in their winter quarters. I think Susan, in particular, rather hoped that if they were forced to sell *Fame*, it might be possible to crew occasionally for friends such as these. I

wondered idly if there might be some sort of romance brewing.

As we talked on together down in the saloon, they told me of the various other yachts which they knew and visited. There was Group Captain Saunt, who owned a boat rather like *Fame*, and who sounded a great personality, and an intrepid sailor. Last year he had taken his boat, the *Ran Dan II*, single-handed over to Norway. He was a great yacht visitor, and always came over for a yarn if he got the chance. A great many of the better yachts on the coast, however, appeared to spend most of their energies in the numerous ocean races organised from port to port during the summer. They seemed to keep rather to themselves. I suppose they had more in common with each other than those who pottered around by themselves visiting these muddy creeks. Listening to the girls I found myself being introduced to a whole fraternity which I had never really had anything to do with or met before. This interested me, and I asked many questions. It appeared that all types were represented afloat, from those who spent most of their time gossiping on the Yacht Club verandahs, to those who prided themselves on their eccentric habits, and never landed except to buy bread and take on water. I wondered what sort of reputation Sir Charles and his daughters had built up for themselves, and hoped that I would be able to find out one day. It would certainly be interesting to know.

I had expected that with all the experience they had acquired with their father, and their obvious competence as yacht hands, they would be critical and scornful of others, but this was not so. I asked what they knew of the celebrated case of the *Peony*, which appeared to have been prematurely abandoned in the North Sea about two summers before. I remember thinking at the time that it looked rather bad. But all they said was that it was very difficult to judge

unless one had been on board. Their father had, however, always impressed on them that more accidents had occurred through panic than through any other cause. The first secret, he said, was to make sure that all your gear was sound. Always have a look round up aloft whenever chance offered, he advised. Then when one got caught in a tight corner one felt confidence in one's ship and one kept one's head. So many people took a ship straight out of a fitter's yard and in the first tight spot they found that something or other carried away, or jambed aloft, or the pump choked with shavings in the bilges. Then they got panicky and trouble started. It probably wasn't their fault really, as most people these days were too busy to attend to these things themselves, but nevertheless that was the danger.

The more I listened to these two, the more impressed I was at the wealth of experience they seemed to have acquired, and this, surely, I felt must be most unusual for girls of their age.

I could have gone on listening indefinitely, but Juliet suggested that Susan and I had a look round while she produced some lunch.

The patter of rain on deck had already warned us that the weather was deteriorating, but when we went up it was clear we were in for a stormy day, so I helped Susan haul the dinghy on deck. After that we let out a bit more cable to be on the safe side.

"She'll be all right here," she said. "The wind is beginning to veer to the South-west already. If it had started to back the other way, we should have had to run back, but it generally does this. The only trouble is that it's high water about seven this evening, and of course we will be more exposed then when the sands cover. We may find it a bit uncomfortable, but we are not likely to drag, and it may start to ease off by then."

By the time we had taken these precautions, lunch was ready, and all three of us devoured it hungrily.

The rest of the day was uneventful. We mostly read or slept in our bunks. From time to time I put my head up to get a breath of air, but there was little to see except the grey outline of the sand and mud which was protecting us, and the *Dragonfly* further to leeward. At one time during the afternoon a small coaster came in and anchored, presumably waiting for the tide before going through the Ray Sand Channel. But towards evening she weighed and proceeded to the South.

After tea Susan rummaged about and started to go through her charts, which reminded me of those I had brought down.

"How about those charts you asked me to bring down?" I asked. "I see one of them is of the Scheldt estuary. Surely you aren't planning to go over there now, are you?"

The two girls looked up rather hopefully.

"Well," said Juliet, "we did rather hope to, but if you are against it, I suppose we can't. Daddy told us that we were to do what you said."

I laughed. "I am glad to hear that. It seemed to me that most of the time it was I who was carrying out your orders. But how about your father? Did he know we were going off to Holland?"

It did seem to me that if the old boy relied on me to look after these girls, the least I could do was to make sure he knew where we were going. This weather was unsuitable for the crossing in any case, and so I dug my toes in and insisted that we go back to discuss it with their father. We decided, therefore, that we would get under way the following day and put back.

As Susan had predicted, we had a somewhat uncomfortable evening. The tide had covered the banks, and there

was quite an expanse of water to windward. Although this was insufficient for anything of a sea to develop, it was quite enough to set us pitching and jerking at our cable. Fortunately I am not prone to sea sickness, but I could well imagine that anyone who was would have found this most trying.

At dusk I remained on deck for some time by myself. The feeling of lassitude I had had after being cooped up all day passed off, and once again I was glad to be out and was beginning rather to relish the idea of a short cruise over to Holland. Cruising in a yacht certainly had a great fascination, and I could feel myself slowly being gripped by it.

Refreshed by this breath of air, I went below, turned in and was soon feeling pleasantly drowsy. For some time I watched the girls, and presently noticed Juliet, sitting on her bunk, sand papering her legs.

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "What are you doing?"

"I'm rubbing my legs," she replied, "to make them smooth. But you're not supposed to be watching me."

"All right," I replied. "But I must say I should have thought it would only have made them more bristly. I'm sure it's a terribly bad thing to do."

"Nonsense, Uncle David. Lots of women do it every day," said Juliet. "If you don't believe me, you can read about it in this *Woman's Own* here."

I withdrew, feeling that I must be rather out of touch with modern developments. No doubt, I thought as I dozed off to sleep, other surprises were in store for me. I had shunned female company for many years. They always seemed to think of nothing but dances and parties. But these two certainly seemed very different from anything I had met, and I found myself enjoying their company. I didn't see really that there was any need for me to hurry back to my garden. My blooming old roses could wait. I

wondered what Jenkins would think if he suddenly came on board. Cynical devil, Jenkins. He would draw the worst conclusions. Anyway, he wasn't here, so why worry. To the pure all things are pure.

I suppose it was because I had been sleeping in the afternoon, or it may have been some reawakened sea-faring instinct which made me sleep lightly, but I woke up once or twice during the night. On the first occasion I must have been disturbed by Susan coming down after having a look round on deck. The second time I lay awake for some time and then went up to have a look round myself. It would be one up to me, I thought, if by my vigilance I managed to save the ship from dragging ashore. It was still inclined to rain, but the wind seemed to have eased a bit. A pretty unpleasant night to be out, I thought, and felt thankful we were at anchor. I was wondering why it appeared to be so light, when I remembered there must be a full moon shining above the cloud. I looked around for the *Dragonfly* to see if we had dragged down towards her. At first I thought she had gone, but then I spotted her dark shape to leeward and noticed that her riding light had gone out. I looked at ours and was glad to see that it still burnt brightly. Presumably in an outlandish corner like this there was not much likelihood of being run down, anyway, that was their look out, not mine.

I was just about to go back to my bunk when I heard the spluttering noise of a small motor boat coming down wind. It passed quite close and at one time I contemplated hailing it. It carried no light, but I could follow its wake for some distance. As far as I could see it was going to the *Dragonfly*. I thought at one moment that I could just

discern it as it swung round to go alongside, but it was too far off in that visibility to be sure; however, I didn't see where else it could be going. I remember being rather surprised that anyone should be out at such an hour in so small a craft. As far as I could see it had come straight from Denghie Flats, and I could hardly believe that even an intrepid yachtsman like Maitland would choose the hour of four o'clock on a wet, windy night to seek his pleasure on such a muddy looking place as Denghie Flats. I could only imagine that he had been away in the evening and had been unable to find his way back. Perhaps he had lost his bearings when his riding light went out. But in that case he could have used ours. However, no doubt there was some simple explanation. It was too cold to go on speculating, and I was soon back in my warm sleeping bag again.

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN we awoke the weather had started to improve. The wind was round in the West and the clouds overhead were beginning to break. It was, however, still blowing freshly, with every now and then quite a gusty squall. *Dragonfly*, I noticed, was nowhere to be seen. She must have got under way some time back. Probably while it was dark. It was still early, but the girls were keen to get moving without delay. If we were indeed going to Holland, they argued, then let's lose no time. By weighing now and having breakfast under way, we could just catch the tide into West Mersea. To be sure of getting in, however, we would have to make the bar by 11-30, so we set to work, therefore, as speedily as we could.

It took some time getting our anchor as we had a good deal of cable out, but once under way we made rapid progress through the water. Susan calculated that we could cut right across Batchelor's Spit and keep close up to St. Peter's Flats at this state of the tide, and save quite a bit. If we did touch, she said, the wind would soon help us off. So we took a chance on it.

I noticed that there was an accepted agreement whereby Susan seemed to take charge on deck, although she was the younger, while Juliet seemed to preside below and take charge of the commissariat. Most sisters, I thought, would have argued about this, but perhaps their father had sorted that out.

When I asked them, Juliet scornfully accused her sister of being hopelessly vague when it came to things like meals,

and said that she'd be bound to forget the matches or something important, and that we would never really get a square meal. Susan, on the other hand, maintained that her elder sister was equally hopeless at the wheel. "She's always wondering whether the kettle's boiling over or something like that, instead of paying attention to the wind, and the next moment *Fame* would be up in the wind with her sails all shaking."

I found it difficult to believe that either was quite as incompetent as the other made out, but it seemed that they had arrived at a very good settlement.

It was a dead beat up the Blackwater, and I asked the girls if they ever used their motor.

"Not if we can help it," said Susan. "It's much more satisfactory if you can do without. We always feel that once you start motoring, you might as well give up sailing altogether. We give it a run sometimes to make sure it's working, but we don't use it otherwise. The engine is Juliet's baby, not mine," she concluded, "I'd much rather have a motor winch."

We had one incident of note on the return trip which I recall. As we were working our way into the creek above Mersea quarters, we must have stood over a bit too far on one tack, anyhow I suddenly realised that we were aground. In a flash the girls had got the dinghy over the side and we were laying out the kedge. I don't think the whole operation can have taken more than a couple of minutes, and we had warped her afloat again and were continuing on our way as if nothing had happened.

"You have to be quick," said Susan, as if in answer to my thoughts, "otherwise on a falling tide you get stuck for hours. And, of course, if you're unlucky she might lie right over on her side when she dries. *Titania*, which you probably saw when you first came down, did that last summer

and when the tide rose, she just flooded. Poor Major Dugdale had a frightful time getting all the mud and seaweed out of her. Then, changing the conversation, she said, "Perhaps you could help Juliet get the mooring 'on board, we're just coming up to it."

As soon as we had secured, I noticed the *Dragonfly* not far off, and remembered to ask the girls about what I had seen in the early hours of the morning, but they seemed to think it quite normal.

"Maitland's always astir at odd times. He seems to thrive on it," said Juliet. "Now that it's mid-day you'll probably find him in his pyjamas. I expect he was out fishing," she added. "The Ray Sand Channel is a very good place for sole and dab, but you have to get there on a rising tide."

"As a matter of fact they offered some to us," added Susan, "when we went over, but Juliet always objects to cooking fish as it's such a sweat to prepare."

"I hadn't thought of that," I replied. "I'm afraid my suspicious mind conjured up visions of a bit of quiet smuggling. But she's certainly a fine looking vessel. If I get the chance I'd like to meet her owner some time. He sounds rather an enterprising person."

We passed quite close by on our way in, but as no one appeared to be about we continued ashore and were soon back at the Elms.

Sir Charles was delighted to see us, and at once asked the girls how they had got on. Every detail was of intense interest to him, and I could see him nodding approval here and putting in a question there. To my surprise I heard myself described in terms enough to make a Viking blush. But when I protested that I was really little more than a beginner, I could see that this was only taken as false modesty on my part.

Anyway, he had no objection to our going over to

Holland if I could spare the time, and before I could get in much of a word this had been decided, and the girls had gone off to top up with provisions and water.

While they were away I indulged in that great luxury for all who sail in small ships—a good hot bath. Even after the shortest trip there are no pleasanter feelings than the immersing of the body in hot water. and a good comfortable shave.

Much restored by this, I found the Admiral in the garden and told him how immensely impressed I had been by his daughters, and how surprised I had been to see them so proficient at handling the *Fame*. He was naturally delighted to hear this.

“Yes, they know a lot about cruising,” he said, “and I doubt if there is anyone who could teach them much about this part of the coast, either. The trouble is that it doesn’t get them anywhere. They really ought to be looking for jobs, you know, but I don’t quite know what they could do. Juliet is the practical one of the two, and with a bit of training might fit in somewhere. But then they don’t want to be parted. You can’t blame them. They’ve always been together and they sort of feel dependent on each other. Susan, of course, is a bit of a dreamer. In fact, I never know what she is thinking. Anyhow, I can’t see her settling down as a typist or a nurse. Just imagine her going into the Labour Exchange, and being asked what she could do, and having to fill in some form. Poor Susan! I’m afraid I have neglected their upbringing rather.” He stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“She ought to be a Thames Pilot,” I said jokingly. “She certainly knows every inch of the way. But why doesn’t she go into the W.R.N.S.?”

“Oh, well, we’ve thought of that. It would be fine if she could be in a boat’s crew, but at the moment all they seem

to want are cooks and stewards. And in any case that would mean their being parted."

"Yes," I agreed, "it does seem rather difficult. I'll talk it over with them when we are away and see if we can think out some practical solution. They ought to marry, I suppose."

The Admiral laughed. "You try that one on them. That always sends them up in smoke. Anyway, they don't meet many young men the way they go."

"I don't know," I replied. "They seem very sociable when they're afloat, rowing over and visiting yachts. I can imagine that they might easily run into some kindred spirit that way. I understand they make a point of visiting other vessels when cruising. They were certainly quick enough off the mark when the *Dragonfly* anchored nearby yesterday."

"Oh, yes, they rather like the *Dragonfly*. Did you meet Maitland? You'd like him. He's a pleasant, genial fellow, and a very experienced and energetic yachtsman. If you get the chance you ought to introduce yourself. I don't really know a great deal about him, but I can quite see why the girls rather admire him. He cuts a romantic figure, you know. That yacht of his goes out in all weathers and is wonderfully handled. That's what appeals to the girls. One year they did a mid-winter cruise across the North Sea, I believe. You won't get many yachtsmen to do that sort of thing. She's a wonderful vessel, too. Built in Germany before the war, I gather, but it's the way she's fitted out that struck me most. There's a sort of sense of comfort below which you don't get in most yachts. It was after visiting her that I had the coal stove fitted to *Fame*. It's made a wonderful improvement."

We sat and talked on.

"Batt's a peculiar devil," the Admiral continued. "A

dour-looking fellow, but I've never spoken to him much. He is probably one of those people who don't shine in company, but are worth a lot when you're in a tight corner. You certainly ought to meet them. If the *Dragonfly* is in you'll probably find them in the 'Victory', they are usually there of an evening."

"Yes," I said. "I might look in later. We shan't be able to get out till about seven in any case, I understand."

At that moment the girls returned, having bathed and done their shopping. We had tea in the Admiral's house, after which I strolled off down to the local, having arranged that the girls would take me off about seven o'clock.

The Victory is a pleasantly situated inn, looking out over the water and drawing to itself a character all of its own. A group of trees shelter it partly from seaward, and out in front there is a very small grass plot protected by a row of low cement posts. In the middle stands a large white flagstaff. The appearance, I thought, was more like a yacht club, and indeed it fulfilled many of the functions of a club house.

As I pushed open the door, I noticed that the place was already well filled. Most types were represented, but there was an unmistakable predominance of yacht hands, with their blue sweaters, peaked caps and sea boots. I presumed they were mostly from the boat yards in the village. Round the walls were framed regatta notices, and charts, both of the Thames Estuary and the more immediate approaches to the Creek. I glanced round to take stock and advanced to the bar, where I ordered myself a beer. It was thirty years since I had set foot here, I realised, with a peculiar feeling of nostalgia creeping over me.

"I looked in on the chance of meeting Mr. Maitland," I said to the barman. "I'm afraid I don't know him by sight, but Admiral Mathews told me I'd find him here."

"They are just coming in now," he said, indicating the two men who had entered. They approached the bar and as soon as they had ordered their drinks I introduced myself.

"You're from *Dragonfly*, I believe. My name is Mackenzie. I was out in Admiral Mathews' boat when you anchored near us under the Buxey. You know the Admiral and his family, I believe."

"Why, yes, indeed," said the shorter of the two. "And allow me to introduce my friend, Jim Batt. My name is Maitland. Yes, of course we know all about you from Juliet and Susan. They told us you were on board when they came over. They're a grand couple, those two, as I expect you already know. And how do you like the *Fame*?"

"Oh, she's a splendid little ship," I said, "but I must say I like the look of your *Dragonfly*. I should imagine you could go anywhere with her. The girls have been telling me great things about the cruises you do."

"Well, yes, she is a good vessel. I was lucky to get her. You must come on board some day. How long are you in for?"

"I'm afraid we are off tonight," I replied. "The girls have persuaded me to go over to the Dutch coast, and we are planning to get out on the evening tide."

I could quite see why people liked Maitland. It was, I think, the way he interested himself in the person he was talking to. He was one of those people who in some way made you feel just a little bit more important than you really were.

"You're going over to Holland," he repeated. "Oh, well, we've often met the Mathews over there. It makes a good cruise, but I'm not sure that I'd particularly like to go on taking *Fame* over myself."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Well," he said pleasantly, "I always admired the gallant

Admiral for pushing that little ship of his so far afield, but she never looks really up to it to me. She must be getting on, too. However, don't let me be too discouraging, especially if you're just setting off. I'm sure it will be all right with an experienced hand like you on board. But those girls are young and full of enthusiasm, and the last thing I'd like is to see them getting into trouble."

"I must admit that I don't know them or *Fame* all that well," I replied. "But the two of them struck me as being pretty level-headed."

"Oh, yes, they're a smart pair of kids," said Batt, breaking into the conversation. "But we've seen so many people get into difficulties through over-enthusiasm. Haven't we, Sandy?"

"Yes," commented Maitland thoughtfully. "I could give you dozens of cases. But anyhow you'd better not tell them I have been disparaging about their ship," he continued, "or they'll never speak to me again, and I do admire their enthusiasm."

This was the first outside opinion I had had on the girls, and I was keen to find out a bit more, but at that moment a man and his wife came over and greeted them. Then a third joined the circle, and I could see that there would only be general conversation, so I let it drop. I talked to the barman for a bit, and found that he had lived all his life in the neighbourhood, and remembered my brother's boat and some of the others. There was the *Golden Vanity* and the *Heron*. It was nice to meet someone who remembered those times. He asked me after Platt, who seemed to be a well-established character in the village. The 'Admiral's Man' he was called.

When it was time to go on board I bid good evening and reminding Maitland on the way out that I would come on board one day, I made my departure.

Either I was a bit early or Susan a bit late in coming in to collect me, so I went over and sat on an upturned boat nearby. There was the *Dragonfly* looking trim and ship-shape. I could see someone wandering about 'on deck. Presumably they had a paid hand. I wondered idly why Maitland should have been so discouraging about *Fame*. I felt I could hardly tell the girls. They would feel terribly hurt. But it really did seem to me that Maitland was being a bit gloomy about things. As far as I could see the boat was in first class order. And I had been particularly impressed with the thoroughness and care with which the girls anticipated every eventuality. No one could call them haphazard or reckless. Then he had been quite wrong in saying that the *Fame* was an old boat. As far as I could recall she had only been completed shortly before the war. Curious he shouldn't have known this, I was thinking, when I saw Susan rowing in to bring me off.

As soon as we were on board we lost no time and were presently standing out to sea. The yacht had been cleared with the customs, and we were free to lay our course for the Dutch coast.

I must have visited a hundred or more foreign ports in my time, but even to this day I get all the same old thrills as I did the first day I ever set out. I get this twice. First when I see the shores of my homeland receding, and I realise that we're off—off into the unknown. And then again when I enter the first port of call, and see that the houses are different. And that the smells and noises are unlike what we have in England. Somehow in small boats these thrills are magnified, one is closer to them and they are all so much more personal than they are when viewed nonchalantly from the lordly deck of a liner.

It was almost calm outside, and by the time it was dark we had practically lost steerage way. By midnight, however,

it had freshened again and we made splendid progress through the calm water.

Crossing the Thames estuary by night is a most complicated feat of navigation, and I can't pretend to have understood the way we went. For most of the time I was at the wheel, following Susan's directions, except for an hour or two when Juliet relieved me. All around us the night seemed to be alive with twinkling and flashing lights, and Susan was busy popping up with the binoculars and stop watch, and then down again to the chart. Occasionally she would warn me to keep a look out for some unlighted buoy. One, I remember, we passed unpleasantly close. The tide was evidently setting us hard down towards it and we only missed it by a few feet, a large, ugly, dark shape which suddenly passed down our lee side. It just cleared our stern and disappeared into the night, clanging its great bell in a mournful way behind us.

On another occasion Susan came up and sat beside me for a while. I could see from her anxious little face that she was worried about something. Presently she asked me to run up into the wind while she took a sounding. It was just over two fathoms and she muttered something to the effect that it should be more than that and slipped below quickly.

"Come round right away more to the South," she said insistently. "As far round as you can on this tack. We are too far to the North."

Then in about half an hour she remarked, "We are all right now, it's a clear run to the Dutch coast."

It was getting light by then and we were still slipping along quietly at about four or five knots. Then Juliet came up with some hot coffee, which was indeed most welcome, and we organised ourselves into some kind of watches so as to get a bit of sleep.

On the whole it was an uneventful trip over, in fine hazy

weather with light winds. Before dark we had picked up the low outline of the Island of Walcharen, and not long after we had anchored and cleared with the customs.

That was the beginning of four or five of some of the most pleasant days cruising I have ever spent. All in and out among the Islands where the Scheldt and the Rhine flow out into the North Sea. We sailed by day mostly and anchored by night. There was plenty of sheltered water so that we could enjoy ourselves in a leisurely way, sailing about amongst the hundreds of smart little sailing boats over there.

In these idyllic surroundings, I soon got to know the girls better. They formed an interesting comparison with each other. At first I thought they were strikingly alike, both in appearance and character. Indeed, they did have many points of resemblance, but I soon found that they were very different in other respects. Juliet was the more practical, and much more direct in her approach than Susan, and I came to the conclusion that it was she who was really in control. In some remarkable way which I could not describe she took charge from below. At first I had presumed that it must be Susan, the Sailing Master and Navigator, who was the guiding impulse. But this was not so. She was, as it were, employed by her elder sister to do these things in the same way that a business executive might employ a technical expert or chauffeur. Susan intrigued me, however, because I never knew what was really in her mind. Whereas Juliet, I felt, liked me in a straightforward and open-hearted way, and treated me as one of the family, I never really knew whether Susan approved of me or not. For a long time I felt she rather resented my presence. And then some reply she made, or something she said, made me feel that beneath a somewhat dreamy exterior, she was concealing an unsuspected admiration for her honorary Uncle. Any-

way, I hoped that was the case, but I never was certain of it.

It was a life that was full of action and full of variety. Sometimes we would be under way, sometimes exploring one of those attractive little Dutch villages, and sometimes I would go off sailing in the dinghy by myself. Or perhaps we would anchor in some secluded spot where in privacy we could bathe and lie basking in the sun to get brown. The girls, I think, liked this best, and longed to sail away to the Mediterranean and to the Greek Islands, which held out to them, as indeed to many others, a sort of legendary attraction. Certainly with their shapely bronzed bodies they would be an added attraction even to those beautiful surroundings.

On one occasion we all went for a brisk walk along the sea wall to take some exercise. Much as I enjoyed sailing and the camp life on board, it was always rather refreshing to go for a good walk and stretch one's legs. We must have walked for many miles, looking down on the sea on one side and on the dykes and canals on the other. As we walked and talked I presently found myself being very heavily quizzed on my own activities. The girls, indeed, seemed eager to know all about me, and all that I had been doing since I knew them out in China. They wanted to know where my home was, who looked after me, and all about the way I lived.

"Don't you find it rather depressing living in such a suburban place?" commented Susan when I was describing my little house. "I should hate to feel there was no real country round me. And travelling up and down each day, surely that must get terribly monotonous, doesn't it?"

"Well, I suppose I'm becoming reconciled to these things. The other day when I was travelling up to town, I worked out exactly how much time I wasted on the journey. It adds up to something like thirty-two days every year."

"What a fearful thought. I wonder you can stick it," commented Juliet. "I should hate that. But what do you find to do when you get home? Haven't you got a son? Or are you quite alone?"

"Yes, I have a son. He's a midshipman, but he's out in the Mediterranean now, and so I am really living by myself. Mrs. Cribbage comes in daily to look after the house, and she orders the food. But otherwise I'm pretty well self-supporting. I get my own breakfast. You two would be surprised how well I fare."

There was a pause and then Susan spoke.

"It sounds rather a lonely sort of life, Uncle David. I'm beginning to feel quite sorry for you. I can't imagine what you do in the evening or at the week-ends."

"Well, fortunately for me there's an inn at the end of the road, and I have a sort of standing arrangement there. I think it suits them too, because it helps to make the place look a bit more crowded."

"And then I suppose you read and play golf the rest of the time."

"No, I hate golf. I read a good deal though, and I've taken to gardening. That really occupies most of my time."

The girls were evidently rather surprised at my simple existence, and we walked on for a bit without saying anything. Then Susan continued:

"I can understand your interest in gardening. To be able to get away into the privacy of your shrubs must be very satisfying. Have you a large garden?"

"Ah! I thought the shrubs would appeal to you, Susan," I replied. "One of the first things your father said to me was that you disappeared into the bushes as soon as anyone came up the drive. But let me warn you he's probably going to have your shrubbery cut down."

"I hope he's not serious about that," they echoed.

"But I still feel you should have someone better to look after you," persisted Juliet. "I'm sure you need a proper housekeeper, instead of your Mrs. Cribbage. It must be very bad for you, vegetating away by yourself like that, Uncle David. Don't you have any relations? Your son, for instance, when does he come home? You must be looking forward to that."

"Yes, I am indeed. But Jonathan doesn't come back for nearly two years. It seems a long time ahead, and I've really seen very little of him. Incidentally he's very keen on sailing too. I might try to bring him along when he comes home. That is if you feel like it."

"I don't suppose he would want to go sailing with women. He would be much too grand for that, I expect."

"I don't know," I replied. "I'd be most interested to see. You are rather different, you know."

"Now you're being unkind," put in Juliet, feeling piqued. "I'm sorry you are disappointed. And what do you think is wrong with us then?"

I realised at once that this was a sore point. "There is no need to be upset. The fact is I don't care for most young women and I was paying you a compliment. You know perfectly well that both of you are different from most of the girls one finds, thinking of nothing but men all the time. Instead of dancing and drinking, you prefer this sort of thing. Quite frankly I think you are very sensible."

This seemed a good opportunity to enquire of the two of them what their plans were for the future, and I asked them if they intended to get jobs.

"That's one of our real difficulties. To start with, Susan and I are determined not to be parted, and then of course neither of us is exactly qualified in any way, except as yacht hands. I suppose Daddy has told you to give us a fatherly talk."

"No, not exactly, Juliet, but you know he is worried about your future, and I merely wondered if perhaps I could help in any way."

"That's very kind of you, Uncle David, but of course, as long as Daddy is alive, one of us would have to look after him, and Susan and I thought that we might perhaps make a bit by chartering out *Fame* during the summer. You see, we could do the work of looking after her in the winter, and some people seem to make a very good profit that way. But I suppose you'll say it's not very practicable."

She shrugged her shoulders and waited for my comment. I didn't really know what to think. There was always the possibility of one or both of them getting married, but bearing in mind what their father had said, I kept off the subject; it would probably end that way in any case, I thought, and our conversation passed to other things.

A place which I particularly recalled was the attractive little town of Voerdijk with its red tiled Dutch houses. It was a fairly fresh day when we visited it, and the breeze was blowing the laundry out on the lines. Anchored off shore were a cluster of those bluff-bowed Dutch sailing barges or *schuyts*, or *boyers*, or whatever they are called. I always get mixed up with their peculiar names. It was evidently a favourite spot of Susan's and she took me round to admire the little streets from different angles. I realised for the first time that although she herself didn't paint or draw, she had a great artistic sense, and seemed to get great pleasure out of the things and places that would bore others. Perhaps it was this that made her difficult to understand. Instead of seeking the companionship of her fellow beings she shunned the crowds and drew all the satisfaction she needed from the solitude and beauty of nature. I was be-

ginning to see what it meant to her, being away in the *Fame*. Away with nothing to disturb her thoughts but the cries of the gulls, the weather and the ever-changing scenery of the sea.

Sometimes I felt the girls got a bit tired of my company. A yacht is, of course, a small place in which to be cooped up for long, and I could hardly blame them for wanting to be left on their own occasionally. They never mentioned this to me of course, they were too tactful for that. But on one occasion I was undoubtedly packed off to church to get me out of the way.

They had mentioned earlier on something about being at Speldam in time for Sunday, but I hadn't paid much attention. When they got there, however, they kept emphasising how attractive the services were in these little churches, and what an interesting church it was, and so on, until in the end I was persuaded to go. But when I asked if either of them were coming as well, they excused themselves. They said that they had been before, and that it would be a good opportunity for them to wash and so on, so I took the hint. I thought perhaps I was being rather a bore, or that they were beginning to wish that they had someone more of their own age. Anyway, off I went.

The service was not particularly interesting. I can't speak Dutch, and so I couldn't follow it at all, and when I got back the girls hadn't had their wash, in fact they hadn't been doing anything. So there it was, and it confirmed my suspicions. However, there was not much to be done about it. I pulled their legs and suggested that if they wanted to get rid of me for the day, it would be more convenient if they told me, then I could go for a walk instead of being made to do the sort of penance they had so elaborately arranged.

"We thought you might be hurt if we did that," said

Juliet. "That's what we did with Daddy. We always used to send him for a walk when we wanted to be on our own. But he always thought we were trying to arrange some sort of surprise, or trying to do something behind his back. He could never understand that we occasionally wanted to be left alone."

Apart from this, however, I hoped that the girls liked having me on the cruise, and I flattered myself that I had picked up the hang of things on board fairly quickly. Certainly I no longer felt quite such an oaf as when I first joined them.

When we came to take our departure from Holland, it seemed that the time had passed all too quickly. As, however, it was time to return, we put into Roerdijk, where we invited the Customs Officer on board. He was a large and genial soul with a bright red face. He descended heavily down into the saloon, and accepted some schnapps which the girls, to my surprise, produced from some hidden recess. They certainly knew how to deal with men, even if they weren't interested in them.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "You have the real stuff. I drink to your successful return. And how is the Admiral? He is not with you? Nothing serious, I hope."

I explained that Sir Charles had been stopped sailing by the doctor, and that I was here to keep the girls in order. I told him that I had served on the Admiral's staff many years ago and was his friend.

"Those two know what to do all right," I explained. "They have everything that is needed—even for Customs, I see. The Admiral told me to give you his best wishes if we put in here," I added as a bright thought and refilled his glass. He drank it at a gulp.

"Ah, yes! The Admiral. He is a fine man. A good seaman and an honourable man. I am sorry he is not well, but

I must be going now. I have much to do. There is some currency smuggling going on, you know, and I have two vessels I must search." And then, turning to the papers before him, "You are the Admiral's friend, yes? Then I need not trouble you. And these are his daughters you have to keep in order. A handful I think," he added with a twinkle in his eye. "Very well, then, here is your clearance, and 'bon voyage' as it is said."

He clambered ponderously up the companion and waved a cheery farewell, as his launch steamed off in the direction of a small Dutch coaster that had just come in. And that was really the end of our cruise in Dutch waters. A sad thought. We weighed after tea and dropped down to an anchorage under the lee of the Schonen Island for the night.

As we left early next day, who should come in but the *Dragonfly* under a press of sail. She was coming in from seaward and looked a fine sight in the early morning, but she passed too far off to exchange greetings. When we got outside, the wind was still blowing freshly, but as the sun rose it began easing and it was not long before we had shaken out our reef. We continued making good progress under full sail, however, and at dusk we picked up the North Foreland light. But the breeze was falling by then, and as we seemed to have made an excellent passage, I suggested anchoring off Margate.

"Margate! Oh, that's a frightful place," said Juliet. "Don't let's go there."

"A wretched place to anchor," added Susan. "If we do have to drop a hook, I'd much rather kedge right out here till we get some wind. Or else hold on and anchor on the edge of one of the flats."

"I believe you two feel rejuvenated by these mud banks," I retorted. "I wonder you haven't thought of trying to live on one of them."

However, the wind held for several hours, helping us slowly on our way, and as I had only another three days leave, it was perhaps just as well to press on our way as far as we could. Eventually we managed to reach over to the Long Sand on the last of the breeze, and anchored in about two and a half fathoms not far from a wreck.

"We'll be well out of the fairway here," said Susan, "in case it comes on thick." And with that we turned in. It had been a long day, and we all felt like sleep.

Sure enough, when we awoke it was thick fog, and we could see nothing. It was one of those days when you could see that the sun was shining. There was blue sky overhead, but down on our level nearer the water, there was a thick blanket of damp fog. I was glad we were not in the fairway. Not far off was the North Edinburgh channel, one of the main deep water channels into London, and we could hear the sirens of the great ships as they felt their way past each other. And every now and then the deep note of the diaphone on the Tongue Light vessel rose above the other noises, with its long drawn out moan followed by a grunt at the end. An unmistakable noise.

"Just as well we're not off Margate," said Susan, sniffing the air. "We are fine here, and if we get a breeze we can probably find our way in."

There was not much else to attend to, so we did full justice to a good breakfast and sat round gossiping in the saloon. After about two hours a light easterly breeze set in, and we got under way. This time, however, I had the less pleasant task of taking the soundings with the lead and line. Every five minutes or so I did this, and in the shallower water more frequently. It was a cold, cheerless job, and the water ran up my sleeve. I had no idea which way Susan

took us in, but three times we ran into less than ten feet of water, presumably when we were passing over one or other of the main banks. Finally we passed on into deeper water for a while, and eventually anchored in about four fathoms.

"It's too thick to try and get right in," said Susan, "and in any case the tide will be wrong, but we are not very far from where we sheltered by the Puxey. A bit farther out perhaps, judging by the depth of water."

We waited there till quite suddenly it cleared and we got under way. But just as we were setting sail, to my surprise who should we see standing into the anchorage but the *Dragonfly*.

Well I'm blowed, I thought, that's a remarkably quick 'turn round' for a yachting cruise. What on earth's the point of doing that?

"That seems to be a pretty funny way of passing the time," I said to the girls. "What do you make of that? She seems to be following us round. I can't believe that's just a fishing trip, too."

There appeared to be little feminine curiosity.

"You always seem to be suspecting the worst of the poor old *Dragonfly*," replied Susan, slightly indignantly. "I shouldn't be surprised if, when he got over to Holland, he didn't get a telegram which made him return."

"I see, and so he rushes back to Denghie Flats to enjoy the mud."

"Well, he's probably waiting for the tide."

"Oh, then why aren't we?"

"The answer to that," said Susan, "is that we draw a good deal less water and can get in about two or three hours before they can."

"I give it up then," I said. "I'm surprised you're not more curious. Love is blind, perhaps," I muttered half under my breath. Susan shot me a dark look, but made no

reply, and we continued our way as darkness fell. This was not easy, but we managed to find our mooring, and Juliet at once rowed ashore to ring up the Customs. We then waited till a late hour for them to come off, but in the end they failed us and we spent the night on board.

However, the next morning they arrived bright and breezy. We bustled through the formalities of entering the country and hauled down our quarantine flag with great solemnity. I have always found Customs officers very reasonable, and in that respect no doubt the girls were glad to have me on board. So many people put their backs up by evasive answers or by not declaring everything they have bought, and then, when they are bowled out, they are indignant at having all their things rummaged. I suppose I must have an honest face, but I've never had any trouble. These two young men knew the Admiral, and were very affable. Out of curiosity I enquired if there was much smuggling going on these days.

"Oh, well," they replied, "as far as yachts are concerned, not much. They are mostly respectable people like yourselves, but there is stuff entering the country in various ways and we have to keep a look out."

As they climbed back into their launch, I remember thinking to myself that it was not a bad life. Pottering about in their own little motor boat. Far better than having to deal with the crowds in the Customs shed at Dover.

"That's just the job for you, Susan," I said brightly. "They must have some women, I presume."

"I've no wish to be employed stripping fat old ladies," she replied. "That's more Juliet's line."

"Well, what's the plan now?" I asked when they had gone. "My leave is up tomorrow. So I don't think I had better go out again."

"What we had in mind," said Juliet, quietly taking

charge, "is that you go up to the house now with one load of things, and while you, Uncle David, have a good bath and a soak, Susan and I will square off on board and bring the remainder of our gear up in about two hours time."

"That's very nice for me, Juliet, but why don't one of you have a good soak and let me help with the squaring up?"

"Certainly not," she replied firmly. "We won't hear of it. In any case, Daddy would like to have a good long yarn with you, and if you have to be off early next day, he won't have much of a chance."

So that was that, and off I went with a sail bag slung over my shoulder and plodded up to the house. The bath was even more enjoyable than before. I soaked and dressed and went down to talk to the Admiral. But, to my annoyance, I found I had left my pipe on board. A straw in the wind; I toyed with the idea of leaving it, in the hope that the girls might find it, but in the end decided that I might have stuck it behind the compass or somewhere where they wouldn't look for it. Besides, I felt like a smoke, and so I went back on board.

As I got to the hard the paid hand was just coming in from the *Titania*, and I borrowed his dinghy and rowed off.

When I got on board I noticed at once that the girls were surprised to see me, and I wondered what on earth they could be up to. They apparently hadn't heard me come alongside and it wasn't till I stepped into the cockpit that Susan's startled face appeared up the hatch. Had she not looked quite so guilty, I might have picked up my pipe from near the compass and contented myself with some casual interchange shouted down the ladder, before returning on shore, and never have gone below. But my curiosity was roused, and, ignoring my pipe, I pushed my way down

the ladder. When I got into the saloon I was simply staggered.

"Good heavens!" I said. I looked round the little saloon which was usually so tidy. It was transformed by numerous packages. Some stacked on the table, others on the bunks, and some even on the saloon floor. At the table sat Juliet with a list which she appeared to be checking.

I picked up one of the packages. "Nylons, indeed, and cigarettes too," I muttered. The truth dawned with startling clearness.

"What the devil have you two been up to? It seems to me that I've caught you red-handed doing something you have no business to be doing."

CHAPTER FOUR

THIS was the last thing I had expected. It wasn't as if they had just brought over an odd package or two, but the whole saloon was festooned with smuggled goods. I looked apprehensively at the skylight, beginning to feel guilty myself.

"What's the meaning of all this?" I persisted, beginning to feel angry.

There was a pause.

"Well?" I queried.

Juliet was the first to speak. "You see, Uncle David, you weren't supposed to find out about this."

"Yes, that's all very well, Juliet, but I don't think you realise how serious this is. What's your poor father going to say?"

There was another pause.

"We rely on you not telling him," said Susan, fiercely, and with tears welling up in her eyes. "And if you are as decent as you've been on the rest of the cruise, you won't do so, either."

I began to feel rather awkward about this. "But he's bound to find out sooner or later, Susan. Someone like Platt is sure to bowl you out and it will be all round the village in next to no time."

"Platt!" echoed Juliet in a hollow tone of voice. "It's Platt who sells them for us."

"Good Lord!" I felt my world beginning to rock, and reached out for something that I could rely on.

"Look here," I said, "this is a very serious business.

And," I added, drawing myself up and looking my sternest, "it's dishonest, deceitful, and you're defrauding the Government. Didn't they teach you about honesty at school?"

"No," said Susan, "we didn't go to school."

"Oh, well, let me tell you then," I continued. "Judging by the amount of stuff here, there is enough to send you to prison. And then how about your father? Perhaps you never thought of that. Think of the publicity—the headlines in the local paper. That never occurred to you, I suppose."

I could see that my stern words were beginning to have their effect.

"But surely you're not going to report us," pleaded Juliet.

"Well," I replied, "I don't know. I'll have to think about it. I'm not sure that I don't have to. As a serving Naval Officer, it's my duty to do so, you know. In fact, it is clearly laid down. There is a special regulation enjoining us to report incidents such as this. This really is a shocking state of affairs. How much have you brought over?"

"We were just checking it through," said Juliet, who seemed to be recovering her composure. "There were supposed to be 800 pairs of nylons, and 5,000 cigarettes."

"And how long have you been doing this, may I ask?"

"We—er—started some time back," she replied, with some hesitation.

"Well, in that case, I shouldn't be at all surprised if this wasn't known to the Customs already. You know they check up with the Continental countries pretty carefully, then they watch their victims for some time until they have collected sufficient evidence. I wouldn't be at all surprised," I added, suddenly recalling the *Dragonfly*, "if Maitland and his friends haven't been keeping watch on you. They've certainly been following us backwards and forwards pretty persistently."

"The *Dragonfly*!" echoed both girls together. "But she's on the same run, too. Only they do things in a much bigger way and go further afield, too. Susan and I have only been doing nylons. These cigarettes are the first time we've tried anything else. But *Dragonfly* has been doing a far bigger trade than we . . ."

"I can only say, Juliet, I'm absolutely dumbfounded. But where on earth did you hide all this. I never saw you bring it on board."

"Oh, well, it came on board when you went off to church at Speldam. While you were praying we were rearranging things on board. Actually it was stowed in the seat lockers underneath where you are sitting now."

"It came on board—my foot! Good gracious!" I expostulated. "Do you mean to tell me that all the time we were entertaining the Customs here and over in Holland, we were sitting on top of this load?"

I was beginning to realise only too clearly how it all fitted in, and began to sweat at the thought. Supposing all this did get into the papers, I should look a pretty good fat-head. I could imagine Jenkins smirking away. And what Captain Thoroughgood would think about it, for that matter, I didn't care to contemplate. I looked morosely at Juliet as the ringleader.

"What on earth made you think they wouldn't search under here? It's the first place I should look in a boat like this."

"Well, with Daddy on board we felt it would be quite safe, because the Customs knew him well, but when he couldn't come out any longer, we had to look for someone else."

"Ah! I see," I snapped out, beginning to feel rather disillusioned. "So that's how it is, is it? Well, there's not time now, but I'll have to discuss this whole matter some other

day. The fellow I've just borrowed the dinghy from will be shouting for it in a moment, and your father will be wondering why I'm so long. I only came back for my pipe really, but I little thought I would run into all this. I shall have to think about it, meanwhile you had better promise me one thing, and that is that you won't do any more of this. And I shouldn't say anything about it to your father, or anyone else for that matter, until I have had a chance of talking it over with you. Now you'd better get rid of this lot without my knowing anything about it. And for heaven's sake, don't get caught."

When I got to London, I thought it wouldn't do any harm to let the girls think things over for a bit. A feeling of uncertainty as to what I might do, would teach them a lesson. They probably guessed that I wouldn't report them to the police, but the possibility that I might tell their father would, I hoped, bring them to their senses. For some weeks, therefore, I did nothing.

It seemed to me, on reflection, that they were indeed an odd mixture. I wondered how on earth they had got mixed up in a racket like that, but I think what annoyed me particularly was the idea that, instead of my having been asked down as a friend, I was only being used as a means to get past the Customs. A sort of stalking-horse. I felt disappointed and somewhat hurt. Especially when I looked back on the time we'd had together and realised that I had grown very fond of these girls. Indeed, in a remarkably short time, I had come to regard them almost as my own daughters. And I had been touched by their interest in the somewhat lonely life I lead. It had left me with a warm feeling towards them. And now, apparently, all this was

just part of some act to cover up their smuggling activities. I could only suppose that every adventuresome young person found something rather irresistible about the smuggler, landing his goods at the dead of night, and that they had been carried away by romantic and adventuresome thoughts. It would be a pity to exaggerate an escapade of this nature. After all, they were only youngsters really, and I could imagine many worse forms of juvenile delinquency. I didn't know what to think of it; certainly I had no particular wish to sever my friendship with the Admiral and his family on this account. And if you looked at this from another angle, it was not without its humorous side.

The question in my mind was whether or not I should report all this to their father. Strictly speaking, of course, that would be the correct thing to do. But when I thought of Sir Charles and how intensely devoted he was to his daughters, and when I thought, too, of his own impeccable honesty and how these girls had presumably been doing this under his very nose on previous cruises; well, my courage failed me.

Fortunately, the fine summer weather was over by now, and I calculated that the *Fame* would probably be up in her winter quarters, so presumably they couldn't be up to any further mischief for the time being. But what worried me most was the thought that they had probably only told me half the story, and for all I knew they might have been up to all sorts of things—or they might have got mixed up with Maitland's crowd in some larger organisation. They certainly seemed to know all about him. If they weren't careful they would find themselves being blackmailed.

Piecing together what they had told me, and what I had suspected of the *Dragonfly*, there seemed to be a good deal to be cleared up.

What the girls needed was a little friendly guidance

rather than a further dressing down—or being reported to their ailing father. Indeed, there was much to be said in favour of not letting him know anything. After all, it would be a great shock to him. It was with these thoughts in my mind that I adopted a less severe approach, and invited them to come and visit me and go to a theatre in town as well.

Sir Charles would like that, I thought. He's always worried because his daughters never go out.

Unfortunately, at that moment my duties intervened, and I was detached from the Admiralty to take charge of a special investigation that had been ordered to enquire into some acts of suspected sabotage in certain Royal Ordnance factories.

Most officers would, I think, have welcomed a break such as this from their normal duties as providing a change from their routine work, but for my part it came at an inopportune moment, just when I would have liked to have cleared up the somewhat doubtful business that I had unearthed. As it was, it was nearly two months before I returned to the Admiralty and could resume my consideration of the nylon trade.

There was nothing of particular interest in my temporary activities. Most of it was of a decidedly secret nature, and concerned those departments working on the development of Guided Missiles, and I gravitated between the Ministry of Supply and various outlying establishments. The possibility of sabotage naturally aroused misgivings that there might also be an unsuspected leakage of information. However, as is so often the case, the evidence was inconclusive, and I was glad to return to what I felt was my normal work. What struck me, I think, was the different atmosphere in the two departments. The somewhat untidy way in which the Ministry of Supply seemed to handle its work

contrasted, I thought, unfavourably with the well established and orderly procedure and practices built up over many years in the Admiralty. This applied specially to the scientific staff whom I had interviewed in the course of my enquiries. One man in particular I remember. I think his name was Julius, but he seemed so dirty and slipshod that I didn't care to get too close, and yet it turned out that he was one of their top-notch physicists. And there were others I could recall. Young fellows who struck me as being really quite irresponsible in their outlook, and yet they were the people who were gradually establishing our lead in many of these vital fields of scientific investigations. I suppose one just had to reverse one's ideas. But having been brought up in a disciplined service, I can only say that it was a relief to return to what was to me more familiar and congenial surroundings at the Admiralty. However, as soon as I had got things straightened out again, I renewed my invitation to the girls.

Late in November, therefore, I met Juliet and Susan on Liverpool Street station. I had, in fact, never seen them in anything but their sailing clothes and wondered how they would appear for a town outing. Pretty rum-looking, I thought to myself, if they relied on Platt's advice for this too. I wondered if they did. It was quite possible. Anyhow, I felt sure he would discharge his task as thoroughly as any of his other varied and sometimes irregular duties for the Mathews family. They should be all right for nylons, anyhow.

I do not pretend to be a connoisseur in women's clothes, so perhaps I am easily satisfied, anyhow, in the event I was agreeably surprised.

"And how much of this has been declared?" I enquired jokingly as I greeted them. This was in the nature of a reconciliation as well as an interrogation, and I think we

all felt reasonably lighthearted as we stepped into a taxi and drove through the gaily lighted streets of London to our theatre.

There is something special about London on a winter's night—with the bright lights shining on the wet pavements, the murky atmosphere overhead, and the smell of exhaust fumes from countless cars scurrying to and fro, that conjures up something that only London can produce. You get used to it when you live there, but for those that live in the country, it is mysterious and exciting. We enjoyed ourselves, and after the show we drove down to my home.

"And how about your luggage," I said as I saw their two suitcases. "I thought you always used kit bags."

The girls were full of interest in my house, and regardless of the late hour, examined it all over as soon as they arrived. By which time it was far too late to start any sort of cross examination, and we soon flopped into bed.

"Now look here," I said, starting the proceedings next day. "What I'm most interested in are your connections with the *Dragonfly*. But before we get on to that I would be very interested to know how this—er—deplorable business started, Juliet."

"Well, Uncle David, in the first place you never really gave us much of a chance to explain why we were doing this."

"I'm waiting to hear."

"You see, our trouble is that Daddy's not very practical when it comes to accounts, and it was pretty obvious to Susan and me when we saw the bills coming in that we would have to give up *Fame*. The cost of everything is impossibly high these days, as you probably realise. And, although we do most of the work ourselves, it just wasn't

possible. I suppose we should have sold her several years ago really, but it was the one thing that kept Daddy going. He has really thought of little else since he retired. I suppose we should have told him. We did mean to, but every time he said something that put us off until—well—we eventually decided that we would have to think of some way round. We racked our brains and thought of every possibility, but there didn't seem to be anything. You see, we needed about a hundred pounds a year, really, and unfortunately we already owed quite a bit in one direction and another. That's why it was so difficult to discuss it with Daddy. He would have been terribly worried if he had known. And then, of course, he hasn't been too well, as you know. So we hit on this."

"I see, Juliet, but surely your father must have realised that there were these bills to pay. I mean, presumably he didn't leave you two to do all the accounts."

"Oh, well, about three or four years ago he began saying it would be too expensive to keep *Fame* on, and that we would have to give her up, but Susan and I felt that if we managed the accounts and did most of the work ourselves, we would scrape along somehow. And so we persuaded him to leave the whole thing in our hands. We thought it would be less of a worry for him. The first year we were quite successful, but just when we thought we had got square, we found she had got dry rot in the counter. Then, of course, we had to send her into the yard, and that set us back nearly two hundred pounds. So, of course, we had to do something about it."

"Hmm," I muttered, as I thought over what Juliet had just said. I was a bit puzzled to know what to think, really. I suppose, judged in their own lights, their determination to keep their father's yacht going by hook or by crook was not altogether unworthy. Juliet was certainly saying her

piece well. I wondered how much all this had been rehearsed between them, and whether I wasn't being a gullible old fool. I was glad, anyhow, that I hadn't already told their father all about it. But I wondered what had made them turn to smuggling in the first place, and how they had become so accomplished. There was a good deal to find out. "What made you think of smuggling, Juliet? I shouldn't have thought you two would have known anything about it."

"Well, you see, we remembered that Platt had once said he could get us some nylons in the village for a pound a pair on the Black Market. And then we noticed when we were over in Holland that we could buy them in the shops for about seven shillings. So we bought a few to see if we could make anything on it. It was a bit risky, of course. We knew it was wrong, I suppose, and I'm afraid that I really persuaded Susan."

"Juliet's got more nerve," put in Susan, "but I'm afraid I'm just as guilty, only there didn't seem any other way."

"Anyhow," continued Juliet, "it seemed extraordinarily easy the first time, and we persuaded Platt to renew his connections with the Black Market."

"And he was quite willing?" I asked.

"No, I wouldn't say that," she continued, "but he's always supported us loyally on other occasions, and when we explained why we were doing it, he said he'd certainly do what he could. And thanks to him we cleared quite a handsome profit. You see, it started in a small way, but we found that over in Holland they wanted pound notes, while over here people were crying out for nylons. So it wasn't long before trade was expanding. It seemed to us that it couldn't be too bad really, because after all we did seem to be providing something that was needed on both sides of the water."

"What sort of profit did you make on a pair?" I asked, beginning to take quite a professional interest. She cocked her head on one side while she made some mental calculations. "Well, by paying for them in English money, we could usually get them for about nine bob a pair, which was a good bargain. But over on this side the price they fetched varied a bit. There seemed to be rather a lot of middlemen in the Black Market, and we were lucky if we got more than twelve shillings. One could, of course, always get a good price for a small consignment, but we found that the larger we got the more difficult it was for Platt to dispose of them. I suppose we cleared about three bob a pair on the average, which wasn't bad, considering they stow very flat."

"How about the cigarettes?" I asked.

"Well, we never tried them before. The lot you helped us to bring over was the first——"

"I presume you are referring to the consignment which I caught you landing," I interrupted. "However, don't let me stop you, we are just getting to the interesting part. It seems to me that you had better write a book about it one day."

"Well, anyway," continued Juliet, "we found cigarettes very difficult, each packet and each cigarette had written on it, 'For export only', and there are all sorts of secret trade marks on them. Platt said that the only way he could get rid of them was by going to one of the ports, so that they wouldn't be traced. In the end he took them with him when he went to visit his mother in Chatham. We only really tried them because we couldn't get enough nylons."

"I must say," I interjected, "I'm a bit worried to find that in addition to smuggling these things into the country, you've been smuggling currency out. That's much worse than nylons, you know."

"Currency?"

"Yes, pound notes."

"Well, I really don't see why that's so very bad," replied Juliet. "I know you are very angry with us both, Uncle David, and I know one is not supposed to do these things, but I'm dashed if I see why it does any harm. Susan and I have argued about this for hours."

"Of course it does harm—you two mugs," I retorted.

"I must say I can't see how," chimed in Susan. "It seems to me that the more nylons we buy over in Holland the more they'll have to get from England to replace them. Surely it ought to help this country to sell its exports. I thought the reason why things were scarce over here was because we had to export them. Well, surely this is going to make the Dutch buy more from us."

"Wait a bit," I said, feeling a bit puzzled.

"I don't see what's wrong," said Juliet. "It seems to me that we are not only helping our exports, but by bringing them back here we are also helping to overcome the shortage in this country at the same time."

"Yes," I said brightly, "that's all very well, but don't you see that what we want to do when we sell these things in Holland is to earn some money over there. That's the whole object of exporting them. But if people like you go and take the money back to Holland then it undoes all the good."

"But surely," continued Juliet, "unless we take the money over to Holland they won't be able to go on buying these nylons from us."

I was beginning to find that this was rather more complicated than I thought. "It seems to me we need someone like you, Juliet, as Chancellor of the Exchequer. I'm beginning to see why your father put you in charge of the accounts. But let's leave this, otherwise we'll get nowhere.

If you want to know what the answer is, I'll find out in my office and let you know. It'll give Jenkins something to do. But what I want to know is, where does the *Dragonfly* come into all this?"

"Oh, well, we started as I have explained, in a small way, working on our own. But as business expanded we had to have a better organisation for buying over in Holland. We picked on a little village called Kjorn, and what we did was to go into a likely-looking shop there and arrange with them to collect a decent sized consignment for us, on the understanding that we would collect it the following summer. As a matter of fact, we'd been dealing with them before, and they were quite agreeable. The advantage of this was that it gave them the whole winter to buy them in without arousing too much suspicion over there. In fact, it worked so well that we decided to have another collecting centre at Vaerst. The *Dragonfly* was in when we arrived, but we didn't think much of that. We'd often seen her about in various places. We got into contact with a likely looking dealer in the town and started to sound him carefully, and had just about put our ideas to him, when in walked Sandy Maitland and Jim Batt. The dealer, much to their annoyance, thought we were all working together and completely gave the others away, before they could stop him."

"What happened then?"

"Well, at first they were very annoyed and told us to lay off. But later in the day we went over to the *Dragonfly* and talked things over, and when they found that we were also apparently operating from another place, they seemed more impressed, and agreed to let us in on Vaerst, if we let them in on our arrangements at Kjorn. We thought this over for some time, and when we got back to England we decided that it would be the best plan. As far as we could

see, *Dragonfly* had contacts in most of the best places, and sooner or later would probably open up in Kjorn also. And we thought we might find ourselves more or less frozen out. If we agreed to this plan, we thought we might benefit by being introduced to a much larger and more efficient organisation over there."

This trend in the conversation began to confirm my fears.

"But weren't you rather frightened at getting mixed up in all this?"

"Well, we thought of that," continued Juliet, who seemed to be the principal spokesman for the girls throughout most of the examination. "But—well, Sandy didn't strike us as the sort of person who would let one down, and we felt we could trust him. We always felt a bit doubtful about Jim Batt, but as it was Sandy's yacht, we felt he was the one that counted."

"What made you think you could trust Maitland?"

"Oh, we just thought he looked a decent sort. You've met him, Uncle David. Don't you agree he looks the sort of person you'd trust?"

"I thought he was a pleasant enough fellow to meet," I said, "but most rascals are fairly plausible."

"Anyway," continued Juliet, "he helped us out of a jam on one occasion, and I still feel he's not the sort of person who would let you down."

"What was the occasion when he helped you?"

"Oh, that," she replied, "was when we were getting our stuff ready to go ashore just after we had got in one day, and Daddy suddenly came on board unexpectedly, rather in the same way as you did. Only on that occasion Sandy had just left us sorting things out. He'd been teasing us about what would happen if we got caught, and describing what Susan would look like in Holloway. Anyway, just as he was leaving to go ashore, he saw Daddy, and realised he

was trying to get off to the *Fame*. So Sandy went in and persuaded him to go over to the *Dragonfly* instead, to see the new stove he'd fitted. Of course, Daddy can never resist a thing like that, and by the time he came over to *Fame* we had the place cleared up and Sue and I were hard at work scrubbing out the saloon. And in one or two other little ways we always felt he would help us out if he could."

"All right then, Juliet, and how did this arrangement work out?"

"Well, let me see, we must have fixed this up about three summers ago, and cleared about a hundred pounds, but the next time we went over to Kjorn, which you remember was our place, we found *Dragonfly* had got there first, and had cleaned the place out. She was still at anchor, however, and so, bursting with indignation, we went over and bearded them. Sandy, I must say, was very fair about it, but insisted that instead of releasing our share then and there, with all the difficulties of taking it back to *Fame* without Daddy seeing, he promised us fifty pounds over in England when he'd sold it. This seemed fair to us and, what's more, he paid up more or less as soon as we got back."

"That was two summers ago," I said, working it out roughly in my mind. "How did you get on last summer, then?"

"Last summer? Well, yes that was two summers back, but as I was going to explain, when Sandy Maitland paid us the fifty pounds he had promised, we went over to the *Dragonfly* and had a good long talk with him. There were just the two of us and Sandy, and he asked all about us and all about how we started. He was rather amused, I think, at the idea of us doing this, but he was afraid we might get into trouble. So many people started off with a run of good fortune, he explained, but sooner or later they all slipped up, or else they had bad luck, and 'for responsible people

like you two girls and your father', he said, 'it was a very serious matter'."

"Didn't you ask him how he expected to get away with it himself?" I put in.

"Yes, we asked him that, but he seemed to think that his system was far more carefully worked out than the way we did it. For one thing he apparently didn't depend on getting it past the Customs as we did, and for another he considered that our means of disposing of it ashore would sooner or later be traced back to our neighbourhood. I think that was what was worrying him, really. He felt that we, in some amateurish way, might give the whole show away, and that he would end by getting caught as well. Anyhow, when he found out what we were doing it for, he offered us a hundred pounds to lay off for a whole year. He said that from his point of view it would be worth that to keep us out of the way and reduce the risk of being caught. In any case, he added that there is a limit to the number of nylons one can expect to bring over from the Dutch coast, and if everyone started on it, the show would soon be given away. Besides which he explained that the two of us were not the sort of people to be mixed up in a business like that, and he didn't want to see us getting into trouble. He emphasised that it could be a dirty business and that one never knew who was going to give one away."

"Well, did you accept the hundred pounds?"

"Yes," said Juliet, "it seemed a good bargain for one season's work. And another good reason for clinching it was that we were finding it increasingly hard to persuade Daddy to go on taking us to the same old places, year after year, without arousing his suspicions. He was always suggesting a cruise over to Scandinavian waters, and by accepting this we were able to fall in with the idea. So last year we took the *Fame* right across the North Sea, and had

one of the best cruises we've ever had. The only sad part was that we had a rather severe dusting on the way back. And it was really that which seems to have brought Daddy's arthritis on, or rheumatism, or whatever the trouble is. We had what must have been a pretty severe storm, in fact, and were hove to for more than twenty-four hours. We were shortening sail, when Daddy seems to have strained his back in some way or other, or else it was the effect of being continually wet through. I don't know which, but he was more or less an invalid for the rest of the voyage, and had to remain in his bunk."

I pictured the scene as she described these events, and realised that these two girls must have been through some pretty anxious moments together.

"Tell me," I asked, "how did the *Fame* behave in that sort of weather?"

"Oh, she was good on the whole, and I'm sure she'd weather anything. Our trouble then was that we were not far off the Horns Reef Light Vessel. And with the Jutland coast fairly close to leeward, you get a nasty short sea, and it is inclined to break. What with Daddy being laid up below, and the feeling that we were drifting towards the shore, we were very glad when the wind eventually began shifting round to the North West. Anyhow, we got out all right, but it's stopped Daddy sailing, I'm afraid. I only hope it's not for good, but the doctor seemed to think it was rather serious."

"Yes, I know," I said sympathetically. "It's very sad about your father, and I'm afraid it must be a blow to all of you. But you never know with these things, and even if he can't go cruising it's quite possible he may be able to go out for the day. Which I'm sure would be a great consolation to him. But, tell me, did you have anything more to do with the *Dragonfly*?"

"Well, as a matter of fact we did on one occasion, when we were over in Swedish waters. You know that part, don't you, Uncle David? Anyhow, it's all islands and reefs and very attractive. And we were working our way down just North of Gothenburg when suddenly we came across the *Dragonfly*, under the lee of a small island. We didn't notice her at first because she was lying alongside another ship. However, Susan and I duly rowed over for a friendly visit, but we weren't at all welcome. Jim Batt, who was on deck, was really quite angry, and wanted to know what the devil we were doing following them about. He was quite threatening and said, 'You know, if you're not careful, you'll be getting yourselves into serious trouble one of these days'. Then he called Sandy up. Sandy was polite, but he was obviously very annoyed to see us. He seemed to think that we had agreed to keep out of the way, and he had presumed that we were the sort of people who would keep a bargain. I explained that it was an absolute chance that we had come that way, and with that we went back to the *Fame*."

"What were they doing, do you think?" I asked.

"I don't know. They kept us on deck while we were there, but there were some other people on board, I think, down in the saloon, we could hear them talking. They may, of course, have just come over from the ship they were lying alongside."

"Did you get any idea of what they were up to?"

"I imagine that they must have been taking on board some sort of contraband. We'd always known, or anyhow suspected, that they went further afield, and that they probably dealt in brandy and other things, possibly something sinister, like drugs. When Sandy said it was a dirty business, I rather thought he must have something like that in mind. However, we didn't see anything. They were

lying alongside this ship quite peacefully. She was a harmless looking vessel, a sort of nondescript coasting vessel. I think she was called the *Poltava*, or some name like that. I can't remember exactly, but she had her name written in large white letters down her side."

"Well, what did you do then?"

"Nothing much, really. We didn't see why we should clear out, and anyhow, it would have been rather difficult to explain to Daddy, so we remained there for the night. The *Dragonfly* must have left after dark, because when we got up we were the only ship there. Well, Uncle David, I have told you about the return trip. So you know about that and you know how Daddy got laid up. And that's about all there is. Daddy wrote to you, because he wanted someone to take us out, and you know the rest."

"But, tell me," I said, "was it your father's own idea that I should take you out, or did you two put him up to it?"

"Well, you were always very good to us when we were children, and Daddy seemed to think it would be an excellent idea."

"I see. Because I was good to you when you were children you thought I would be good with the Customs Officers."

"You do look very honest, you know," said Susan, coming to her sister's help. "And you were awfully good with the Customs. Specially when you asked them if there was much smuggling. And over in Holland too, when you gave that dear old boy with the red face a message from Daddy. You sounded so innocent that you almost made us laugh."

I began to see how I fitted into the picture. 'Someone safe', 'someone with an honest face'. Honest, but stupid enough not to suspect what these girls were up to. Not a

very flattering thought, really. I suppose something on my face must have given away what was in my mind.

"I hope we haven't hurt your feelings, Uncle David," said Susan. "We never meant to do that. You see, when we first suggested this, we didn't know you very well. But now we've got to know you, we've got very fond of you, and we feel we've been rather mean."

"And, as you can see," put in Juliet, "we honestly thought we were doing the right thing, and we—er—just looked on you in—er—much the same way as we did our father."

"Oh, well," I replied, "I shouldn't worry too much about that side of the business. I suppose I do look rather an old boffin to you young girls. You see, when I came down I could see how keen you two were to go sailing, and I thought I would try to help you, and do a kindness to your father. There's something about young people who are keen on the sea that touches a chord in me somewhere. I remember when I was your age, perhaps, and—well—anyway, I shouldn't bother about that. I never had any daughters myself, so I suppose I don't understand very much about girls of your age. But when you get mixed up with people like those in the *Dragonfly*, you don't know what you're up against. After all, none of us know anything about Maitland or the other fellow. You don't know what you might get mixed up in."

"We'll promise absolutely never to do this again, Uncle David. Won't we, Susan? You will believe us now, won't you? We'd be terribly upset if we felt you'd never believe or trust us again."

"Well, I'm a foolish old man. I will believe you and I will trust you, anyhow once more. But I would like you to let me know at once if you do at any time have trouble with the *Dragonfly*, and secondly I would like to know

how much more you need to get all square again with *Fame*."

"Thank you, Uncle David, you've been very good about all this, and we certainly will let you know if we have any difficulty with *Dragonfly*. As far as *Fame* is concerned, I think we've just about got things straightened out. The last lot we brought over went well, and I think that should see us through for a bit. You see, after we had laid off for a year, we planned to have one bumper load to do the job. That was the one you came over with; it was much the biggest we'd done, and it was in any case to be the last."

"I suppose that's why you are now so ready to promise you won't do it again."

"Now you're being difficult," said Juliet. "After all, we can't do more than promise. Anyway, it was a bit of a gamble, and we weren't sure if you'd come again. In any case, we felt that our luck wouldn't last indefinitely. As a matter of fact, we have about forty pounds in hand, and we were wondering what you think we ought to do with it now."

"Give it to the Released Prisoners' Aid Society," I replied promptly. "You may need them one day!"

CHAPTER FIVE

I LAY AWAKE that night thinking over the story which Juliet had told me and was glad to feel that they were not really too deeply involved with Maitland. Now that I had a more accurate idea of what had been going on, I would have to make the difficult decision as to whether or not I ought to report the *Dragonfly*. I certainly ought to, but then of course Maitland, or more possibly Batt, might give the girls away. Or, in the course of police enquiries, Platt or the girls might let slip something which would get them into trouble. Anyhow, it was too late to decide. That could wait till tomorrow. I was rather afraid that at some state of the proceedings, the girls might have tried to make me promise not to report Maitland, but fortunately they hadn't. The thought occurred to me, as I drifted off to sleep, that perhaps they were more frightened than they appeared to be.

The next morning was the usual Monday rush. I insisted on getting the breakfast, after which we all went up by train together.

Shortly before we reached Waterloo, in the crowded carriage, I wrote on a scrap of paper, *Can you write down the name of the coaster Dragonfly was lying alongside?* I folded it carefully and passed it unobtrusively to Juliet, and watched her taking care that her neighbour couldn't overlook before noting down her reply. This she passed to Susan who nodded, and, folding it carefully, handed it back to me.

I peeped cautiously to see what she had written, and slipped it in my pocket.

The train drew in to Waterloo, and I was soon saying good-bye to the girls, and hurrying on my way to the Admiralty. They looked a bit forlorn among all the crowd on the platform as I waved to them, and I thought how Susan must be longing for the quieter surroundings of the Essex creeks. The next moment I lost sight of them in the bustling scrum and I continued on my way to my office.

There is always a slight accumulation of work on Mondays, but I soon had this under control, and then pulled the note out of my pocket and studied Juliet's reply. *Pultana*, *Poltava* or *Paltavia*, she had written. I studied the names thoughtfully and then sent for Lloyd's Register of Shipping. I ran my fingers down the names, but there was nothing quite like this. There were *Platon*—U.S.A., *Baltavia*—British, *Pulata*—Italian, and quite a number of others. I couldn't be sure, of course, how far I could rely on Juliet's memory, but the three names she had written down were all very similar and the only names approaching these were all registered in places like Sydney, Karachi, Los Angeles, or Buenos Aires, and it seemed improbable, though not impossible, that an Australian or Argentinian coaster should be operating in the Skagerrak.

I was about to give it up on the assumption that the girls must have been mistaken, when I thought it might do Jenkins good to have a job of work. Perhaps one of the other sections might have some report of shipping movements. Or she might be newly registered. I rang and asked for him.

"Jenkins," I said, "I've been trying to trace a ship of the name *Pultana*—*Poltava*—*Paltavia*, or some name very similar, but I can't find any record of her in this Lloyd's List. I wonder if you could see if we can trace her in any

other way. We may have some record of her in the department, or perhaps you'll find her in the supplement or addenda to this list."

"Yes, Sir, I'll check up. Do you know anything else about her. What tonnage or what nationality?"

"Not much," I said. "She was described to me as a coaster or small steamer, and was sighted in the Skagerrak."

"What's she been up to?" asked Jenkins, allowing his curiosity to get the better of him. "Laying mines?"

"I shouldn't think so. But when you've succeeded in tracing her we may know a bit more. See what you can do, anyhow." And with that he went out.

Half an hour later he returned with a slightly triumphant look. "The *Pultava*, Sir—not shown on Lloyd's List, but we have a report in our records. *Pultava*, Russian flag, 1,700 gross registered tons. Last reported at Skien, South Norway, 28th July the summer before last, when she cleared for Riga. Believed to be the same as the *Posena*. The *Posena*, Sir, made three calls, two to Dramen and one to Skien last summer, taking fertiliser to Riga and other Russian ports."

"Well! Well!" I exclaimed, rubbing my hands. "This is worth following up. The reason I'm interested, Jenkins, is that when I was away sailing last summer, my friends ran across this ship off the Swedish coast, a bit to the north of Gothenburg, with a yacht alongside. A yacht called the *Dragonfly*."

"A British yacht?" enquired Jenkins.

"Yes, a British yacht, normally to be found at West Mersea, and owned by a man named Maitland, or else part owned by Maitland and part by Batt. Sandy Maitland, presumably Alexander, and Jim Batt, presumably James. I was a bit suspicious about this yacht myself, but that is a long story which I'll tell you later. The next step is to see

if we can find out anything about these two. I presume the Passport Office could help. There are probably dozens of Alexander Maitlands, but see what you can do."

"The Special Branch or M.I.5 might be able to help," said Jenkins.

"All right, let them have a try, but there's no need to excite them too much. In fact, I don't want to. This is probably only a bit of smuggling, and I don't want them to start turning the whole place upside down. Just ask if they have anything on their records."

"They'll probably want to know a bit more, Sir; I mean, there must be hundreds of Maitlands, and Alexander is quite a common name."

"Very well, then, go to the Passport Office first, that'll narrow it down a bit, and ask if you can look through some of their files. You'll have to take a letter or something over to say who you are, otherwise you'll find they're a bit sticky. I tell you what, old Houghton'll fix you. He's probably got a friend over there. If not, ask him what you've got to do—you may need a chit from the boss."

"Very good, Sir. I might as well do that straight away. There's nothing much else at the moment, only a few routine matters."

"And when you're over there," I added, "you'd better copy down the particulars of all the likely ones. I hope there are not too many. Their ages, incidentally, are thirty-seven for Maitland, I should think, and Batt—definitely a bit older. I would put him anywhere between 40 and 45. That will give you some idea anyhow. Sandy Maitland is fairish, blue eyes, and weather beaten. Batt again is more difficult. Dark and sallow. That's the best I can do for you, Jenkins," I said, as he noted these particulars down.

"The height, Sir?"

"The height I should guess was, Maitland five foot, ten

inches, and the other fellow a bit taller / say six foot. There you are then, and don't say I'm not observant.

"No moustaches or beards," I called out after him as he went out.

Well, well, I thought, this is rather interesting. I'm beginning to see now why they were so annoyed. It'll be interesting to hear what Jenkins finds out.

For the next few days I didn't see much of Jenkins. He came in occasionally to deal with a few odds and ends, but the rest of the time he was out, presumably following up the task I'd given him. I caught him once and asked him how it was going, but all I gathered was that it was a longish job. Perhaps he was having his own back on me for being a bit secretive at first. Jenkins was like that. He probably felt there was something more which I was holding back, and he was hoping to coax it out of me in return for something he'd got. I wouldn't put it beyond him. I was just thinking of sending for him again, when he came in.

"I think I've made some headway, Sir, on the two—um—yachting friends of yours. When would you like me to go through it with you?"

"Yachting friends?" I repeated, my mind jumping to Juliet and Susan, and wondering what on earth Jenkins had been up to.

"Yes, Sir, Maitland and Batt."

"Oh, Maitland and Batt," I replied, feeling relieved. "Splendid, Jenkins, I hope you've got something interesting. Let's hear what you've unearthed."

Jenkins produced two passport photographs. "These Sir, are, I presume, the two we are interested in."

I looked at them. "Yes, Jenkins, I don't think there is any doubt about either. What else have you found out?"

Jenkins went out and returned with his note book, and then drew up a chair which I had indicated. He looked through a number of pages, paused for a moment, a faint smile flickering over his face, and then he turned over another two pages, and cleared his throat.

"Come on," I said impatiently, "I'm keen to hear."

"Starting with Maitland, Sir. You were right about his age . . ."

"Yes, yes," I said. "But what else have you found out?"

"He's not married. Passport issued or renewed in July, 1946. Cuthbert Alexander Hamilton Maitland, age 37, born in Harwich. British by birth. Father, Herbert John Hamilton Maitland, Doctor. Mother, Maud Littleton. Both deceased. No brothers, one sister married to a Canadian and living in Canada."

"Anything interesting?" I put in.

Jenkins paused. "Yes, I think so, Sir," he continued. "He entered the R.N.V.R. Special Branch in 1940, reached the rank of Lieutenant, qualified as interpreter in Russian. Appointment terminated in 1944."

"Appointment terminated?" I asked. "What does that mean?"

"I followed that up with the Admiral Commanding Reserves, Sir. He was apparently up with the Naval Mission in North Russia, and had embezzled the mess funds or something of the sort. There was a long report on it in his records, and a number of letters from the Admiralty. In the end it was decided to recall him and he was discharged. 'Services no longer required'."

"Hm! I suppose there must have been some reason for not having a Court Martial. Possibly lack of evidence. And now, how about the other fellow?"

"Well, James Batt is 48, Sir. Married, but divorced. But there is nothing against him that you could object to. He

was exempted from Military Service on account of his being in a reserved occupation. He is a chartered electrical engineer, employed by Messrs. J. & S. Fasson. I gather they specialise in some sort of electrical timing devices, but were no doubt on war contracts. Anyway, he was awarded the M.B.E. for War Service. Since the war he has been appointed to the boards of some four companies: Hancock Tools Ltd., Mondels, Messrs. Hackham & Son and P. J. Turner. These, I think, are mainly electrical concerns. Mondels is on the special list."

"What is meant by that?" I asked.

"Oh, I gather they are specially screened, and carry out rather more secret work. They have, among other things, something to do with the development of guided missiles. Since some of the scientists started disappearing they have instituted this special list procedure, which brings certain firms into the same category for security as the Ordnance factories."

"I see. Is that all?"

"Yes, Sir," said Jenkins, "except that Batt has got a bee tattooed on his left buttock."

"I thought you'd probably unearth something like that," I replied. "Well, what do you make of it, Jenkins?"

"What, Sir, the buttock?"

"No, you fool, the rest of the information."

"I don't know, Sir. We haven't really got very much against these birds. If they are smuggling, it's not really our concern. We ought, I suppose, to let the Inspector of Customs know. It rather depends on what you saw to make you suspicious."

"Oh yes, I was going to tell you. Well, if you look at this chart (opening out the one on my desk) I'll explain what I know. The first time I met the *Dragonfly* was here. We were both weather bound and sheltering under the

Buxey¹, and quite by chance on a stinking wet night, at about four in the morning, a motor boat came past and went alongside her. I presume it was her own motor boat, but I couldn't be sure. It came from this sort of creek here in the middle of Denghie Flats."

"It came out of there, Sir," said Jenkins, examining the chart closely.

"Well, I didn't actually see it, but it came from that direction, and it seemed to me an odd thing to be doing at that hour and in that weather."

"Might have been fishing, I suppose," put in Jenkins.

"Well, yes," I agreed, "it might. That's a point I have considered, but then we come to the next occasion. Just as we were leaving Holland a few days later, we saw her coming in. That was on the third of August at about half past six in the morning. We made quite a reasonable passage back, except for some five hours when we were becalmed. After that we went in and anchored in more or less the same place, just north of the Buxey, to wait for the tide. Perhaps we were a bit more over to seaward. Anyhow, at about four o'clock that afternoon, in came the *Dragonfly*. Well, I thought that was a remarkable quick turn-round for anyone on a yachting cruise, and what with the previous occasion, I came to the conclusion they must be smuggling."

"Of course, you do get extraordinary coincidences, Sir. They might have had to come back for some appointment. When you saw them over in Holland, they weren't necessarily coming straight over from England. I suppose you didn't think of asking them, Sir? In a casual sort of way."

"No, I'm afraid I didn't have the chance. In fact, I didn't see them again. My leave was up then, and, as you know, I have been away on that inquiry. So that I haven't really had much of a chance to follow this up till now."

¹ See End-paper.

"What put you on to the *Pultava*?"^b asked Jenkins.

"Oh, well, when I reckoned the *L'ragonfly* was a bit suspicious, I asked my friends what they knew about her, and they said they had seen her alongside this ship over behind one of the islands on the Swedish coast."

"Hm! I presume, Sir, your friends are—er—thoroughly reliable witnesses."

"What do you mean, Jenkins? I have no reason to suppose they would carry out a hoax, or anything of that sort."

"Oh, I didn't mean that, Sir. I was just wondering if they were—well—experienced seamen, or if perhaps they knew that part of the coast. I thought they might be able to tell us if it was the sort of place you might expect to lie alongside some other vessel. The only time I've been yachting I seem to remember we went over to Fécamp and had to lie alongside a dredger. But I don't think anyone was particularly excited."

"I'd rather not know too much about what you've been doing in Fécamp, Jenkins. But as far as my friends are concerned, I should say they are quite reliable. I don't know that I would describe them exactly as experienced seamen, but they've done a great deal of sailing, and from what they said I gathered they were surprised to find her alongside the *Pultava*. As far as I know, they are quite reliable."

"Would you like me to check up on them, Sir?"

"No, Jenkins. I don't think that's necessary. I have known them for many years."

"Well, Sir, you know extraordinary things happen sometimes. I remember when I was in the South of France . . ."

"Damn it, Jenkins, the kind of people you mix with in the South of France has nothing to do with the sort of friends I keep company with over here."

"I'm sorry, Sir, I didn't mean that, but you did say, Sir,

that when we were compiling a report we must be sure that we had its accuracy properly graded."

"Well, in this case you can leave that to me, Jenkins."

"Aye, aye, Sir. What would you like me to do now?"

"That is all, I think, Jenkins, for the time being. Apart from being, I suppose naturally, a little curious about the company I keep, you seem to have tracked down these two very quickly. Perhaps you would send in Miss Sharp. I think I will dictate a report for Captain Thoroughgood. If you have any ideas about this, you might let me know." "

After I had dictated the report I read it through carefully. I seemed to cover the case fairly concisely as far as I could see. There was no need, I thought, to satisfy Jenkins' curiosity as to my sailing companions, but as far as Sam Thoroughgood was concerned, I didn't mind. Indeed, I felt he ought to know. So I added a personal note explaining that I had been out in Admiral Mathews' yacht with his daughters. Then I wondered if I ought to mention about their smuggling. I would look a bit stupid if it came to light later on. I considered this for some time. I hoped that blighter Jenkins hadn't been exceeding his instructions and poking his nose in where it wasn't wanted. In the end I decided not to say anything about the smuggling, and to let the report stand as it was. If necessary it would be better to explain verbally how I got mixed up in all this. Notes, even personal ones, had a habit of getting filed.

"Come in, David," said Captain Thoroughgood. "What's troubling you? As a matter of fact I've been meaning to get hold of you about your report on the Royal Ordnance Factories. The Director was very impressed, and I must say I thought you had done a good job, myself. Sit down, and let's hear what you've got on your mind."

"Thank you, Sir. I'm glad you felt that report was all right. But this is another matter which I thought I ought to mention. It's been on my mind for some time, but I had to drop it while I was away. I'm not sure really, Sir, what to make of it. It may be just a sort of fancy. Anyway, during the summer I came across rather a suspicious business going on. I was down in Essex sailing during my summer leave with some friends . . ." I paused.

"Go on, David, this sounds good," he said cheerfully. "Was she a blonde?"

"No, Sir, nothing like that, I'm afraid. But I was visiting Admiral Mathews. I used to be on his staff and he asked me down. Anyhow, he has a boat down there and I went out sailing with his daughters, whom I used to know as children. And while I was there I came across a yacht called the *Dragonfly*. We ran across her twice, in fact, and it seemed to me that her movements were rather erratic, to say the least, and I thought at the time that she must be smuggling. Anyhow, I made enquiries, and it appears that the year before, when the Admiral was over in the Skaggerak, they had come across this yacht, to their surprise, lying alongside a small coaster called the *Pultava*. Well, Sir, when I heard this I started making enquiries and I find that the *Pultava* is a Russian vessel trading between Norway and the Baltic."

"Hm! That's certainly interesting David, isn't it? Have you found out any more?"

"Well, not a great deal, Sir. But as soon as I found that out I put Jenkins on to seeing what was known about the owners of the *Dragonfly*. There were two men whom I met, and Jenkins has more or less tracked them down. There is nothing very special about them. Maitland, who seems to be in charge of the yacht, was apparently in the R.N.V.R., but was discharged 'Services no longer required'

for something shady! And Batt, who is a company director."

"Well, David, I must say this does seem interesting. I'm just wondering what we ought to do about it. You're fairly certain of facts, I presume. I know you check these things through pretty carefully."

"Yes, Sir, I think it's fairly reliable. It was Admiral Mathews' daughters who remembered the name of the vessel. They couldn't remember it exactly, but we have a report that the *Pultava* was trading there at the time, and she appears to be about the same size. The girls didn't realise that she was a Russian ship, that only came out when I started enquiries up here. It is possible, of course, that there may be two ships with very similar names, but Jenkins and I have both been very carefully through Lloyd's List, and there is nothing else that could possibly be taken for this ship."

"I see. Now, how about the Mathews family? Do they know you are following this up?"

"No, Sir, I don't think so. They still don't know the *Pultava*'s Russian. All they probably think is that I suspect the *Dragonfly* of smuggling. I thought it would be best to leave it at that."

"Yes, very wise of you, I think. If she is up to anything, the last thing we want to do is to start gossip going round in that part of the country. I think we ought to follow this up though, don't you?"

"Well, yes, Sir, I think we should. I thought I ought to make a few preliminary enquiries first, before bringing this along to you. But I'm afraid it hasn't added a great deal, and now I'm not sure what we ought to do next. We can't very well shadow the *Dragonfly* whenever she goes to sea. She'd very soon pack up if we did that, and it would be very difficult to keep a watch on the Skagerrak. The Customs, of course, keep some sort of track on these yachts

when they clear and when they enter. We could certainly ask them to keep us informed. But we don't want some heavy-handed oaf down there to go and give the show away and make them suspect that we are on the look out."

"I agree with you there, David. There is also the question of the police. We ought to get them to check up on these two characters, but the behaviour of this yacht overseas is really, I think, a business which we should handle ourselves in the Naval Intelligence Division. We can get the police and the Security Services to help, of course, but I think we ought to keep it in our hands, don't you?"

"I am glad you think that, Sir," I replied, feeling relieved. "We can see how it goes, but it is possible that the whole thing is a false alarm. We've got very little to go on. It's difficult to know how reliable these girls are in a matter like that. They may be young and enthusiastic and of course one does get strange coincidences. But I agree with you, Sir, I think we ought to try and find out a bit more before we start giving the alarm. It's very easy to jump to conclusions, and I'd feel awfully stupid if they turned the whole place upside down, and then found that everything was above board. The most likely possibility is that they are just smuggling, but from our point of view, before we get them run in for that we should, I think, try and find out if they are up to anything else, and find out a bit more about their contacts over in other countries, or if they are making any contacts at sea, for that matter."

"Yes, and when we've got a bit further, David, then we can leave the police and the Security Service to clear the business up. We can decide that later; meanwhile you'd better go and think out what we should do next."

When I got back to my office I studied the Chart for some time, seeking for inspiration. Then I rang up Jenkins and asked him to bring the Ordnance Survey Sheet covering

the Essex Coast. I had an idea in mind. Miss Sharp brought in a cup of tea and cleared away my correspondence. A pigeon came and settled on my window ledge and looked at me with a beady red eye and then flew off. I looked across the Admiralty courtyard to a great heap of coke, and a row of Admiralty cars parked on the further side, but my mind was running through the evidence; the rather scanty evidence we had collected so far.

"Ah, here you are," I said as Jenkins entered. "Let's spread out the maps. I've mentioned this to the boss, and I think he was quite interested. Anyway, he wants to know what we suggest next. Have you any ideas?"

"Well, Sir, it seems to me that these friends of yours could perhaps give us a bit more information. They might know a bit more about this yacht. If you like, I could slip down . . ."

"No, Jenkins, I think not. I have questioned them pretty closely myself, and I don't want them to start gossiping round there. Besides . . . well, never mind."

We were both leaning over the map.

"Of course, we don't really know much about this part round here," I said, running my finger up and down the coast between the Blackwater and the Crouch. "I was thinking we might go and make a reconnaissance."

"It's a pretty dim looking place, Sir," he replied dubiously. "All mud, by the look of it."

"You don't know the East coast, by any chance?"

"I've been to Clacton, Sir, and Frinton . . ."

"Yes, I might have guessed that, Jenkins, but I'm not discussing your exploits in the seaside resorts at the moment. I was considering Denghie Flats and Ray Sand."

"No, Sir, I've never been there. Ray Sand sounds the better end. But I can't say it looks the sort of place to take a girl . . ."

"I wasn't suggesting inviting your girl friend along either. Your mind runs on women, Jenkins. What I am suggesting, however, is that you and I go down there for a quick look round. To see what the place is like. It'll do you good to get out into the fresh air, and get your mind off all those pin-up girls you have stuck up round your office."

"They're not mine, Sir," protested Jenkins.

"Well, it's an extraordinary thing how they seem to follow you from office to office. Anyway, you can buzz off now and let me know when it's high and low water on that bit of the coast. I can't go tomorrow, but we might make it the day after that."

The day we had chosen for our excursion might well have been better. As Jenkins and I drove down along the Eastern Avenue, a steady drizzle set in and, apart from occasional instructions from my companion as he studied the map, we proceeded more or less in silence. By noon we had passed through Brentwood, and shortly afterwards, at Jenkins' suggestion, we stopped at the 'Restawhyle' for a cup of coffee, and then drove on to Latchingdon, where we had lunch. We then continued east as far as the road would take us, and finally turned up a farm track. This took us a bit nearer the sea, but we were eventually stopped by a notice marked 'Private Property'. Here we got out and, accompanied by the ceaseless barking of a farmyard dog, we proceeded on foot.

The track we followed was quite good and led past a couple of derelict Nissen huts, across a field where cows were grazing, and then alongside a dyke leading down to the sea wall. For the last mile it was both flat and bleak, and

apart from 'a large' cluster of trees surrounding a decoy pond, the scenery was only broken by isolated thorn bushes growing here and there.

We passed only one living soul, a man driving a tractor. He was ploughing in an adjacent field with the gulls wheeling in profusion behind him. Jenkins and I squelched on, with the sticky mud caking under our boots, making each step heavier than the last. At length we reached the sea wall. An embankment of uniform height, about fifteen feet I should say, and continuing from North to South away into the distance. However, it was not in a straight line, as it took a sharp bend every now and then to conform to the shape of the fields.

We scrambled up it wondering what we should see, and stood there for a moment without speaking. As far as the eye could see stretched an enormous salt marsh, and between the tufts and tussocks everywhere were pools of black mud. There was no sign of the sea itself. That apparently lay miles farther out.

"What a bloody looking place," I muttered to Jenkins, thinking of Maitland's friends struggling across this fearful slough in the dead of night with their smuggled goods.

"Yes," he replied pensively. "But I'm not surprised that they chose a place like this. I don't suppose it's very closely watched by the coastguard. It must be heavy going though. According to this Ordnance map this goes out for well over a mile before you start getting to the mud proper. Then it uncovers at low water for another two miles or more. I'm glad I don't have to do it for a living."

"Well, I don't know what you think, Jenkins, but I should imagine that it is pretty nigh impossible to cross this lot at night. However, I think we ought to prospect farther to the south and see if we can find this 'outfall' that's marked on the chart."

We hadn't gone far before, sure enough, we came to a long narrow creek, winding its way through the salt marsh and coming right up to the sea wall. It was dry, or as dry as the mud ever got there, but we could see that at high water springs, the sea would come right up to where we stood. Behind us on the landward side, this narrow inlet coincided with one of the dykes, draining the land inside the sea wall. Water was flowing out through a pipe and draining away as a small stream along the bottom of this muddy gully, and out presumably to the sea.

"One could get in here all right," said Jenkins, anticipating my own thoughts..

"One could," I agreed, "at high water a motor dinghy could come right up, although I wouldn't care to do it on a dark night myself. It would be damned hard finding the entrance. However, here it is, and what is more there is a perfectly good track running all along the landward side of this sea wall where a car could come, or anyhow a jeep. This is certainly quite a possible place, and as far as I can see, the only place."

We spent some time examining the immediate vicinity, trying to estimate at what state of the tide a boat could get up. As far as we could tell from the marks on the mud, it would have to be within about three feet of the top of spring high water.

We hunted round in case any clue had been dropped. There were quite a number of footmarks about, but nearby was a large concrete sort of drain through which the pipe seemed to run. It contained some sort of valve, I suppose, which let the water drain out, but prevented the sea flooding in, and it looked as if this had recently been cleaned out or repaired.

It was beginning to get dark and in the drizzle I must say it looked about the most forlorn and desolate part of

the coast I had ever seen. As we turned for home I could see Jenkins was feeling thoroughly depressed at the sight of the place.

"Well, Jenkins, now you know what Denghie Flats are like, what do you think of the prospects?"

"As far as I am concerned, Sir, it's not the sort of place I should want to land at, but from your point of view I suppose it does look quite a promising place for a clandestine landing."

By the time we regained the car it was quite dark and the farmyard dog was still barking furiously. We climbed in and drove off to London.

The next day I dealt swiftly with the files of correspondence that had accumulated on my desk and then turned my thoughts again to Denghie Flats. Frankly, I found it difficult to concentrate on other matters without this affair intruding itself on my thoughts. If I wasn't careful it would become an obsession. Already I rather suspected Jenkins of regarding me as a bit of a crank, and sometimes I began to wonder myself if I wasn't being rather carried away by it all. Perhaps this was the first sign of second childhood. Perhaps I was becoming a romantic old fool. Soon I might be reading boys' adventure stories. I had half a mind to put the whole thing out of my head, and for about three days I did nothing about it. In fact, it might have ended there but for the fact that I had to make a report to Sam Thoroughgood. There was one thing about Sam for which I was thankful, he always considered everything in a straightforward and direct way. No matter how improbable, one could always count on his interest. One never had the feeling that he would try and make one look foolish, or that he would be cynical or sarcastic. I think if it had been anyone else, I

would have suggested letting the matter drop. The logical thing, I suppose, would have been to turn it all over to the Special Branch of Scotland Yard. I thought about that for some time. But if I did that it seemed to me that they would be sure, sooner or later, to find out about the girls. And then the fact that I'd known all along about their smuggling, and, indeed, that I had connived at it, would be exposed. Technically, I suppose, I had become what is termed an accessory after the fact. I would look pretty stupid if the whole of this came out in their official report to the Admiralty. The thought made me wince. On the other hand, there were very important possibilities behind all this which it would be quite wrong to suppress. That was the problem that faced me. Fortunately, from my point of view, Sam Thoroughgood had agreed that we should keep this in our own hands. In fact, he suggested it. I was glad of that, and I came to the conclusion that the only thing to do was to discuss with him fully what we had done so far, and I would call in Jenkins at the same time.

That afternoon, therefore, I went along to Sam Thoroughgood's office with Jenkins, and with our charts, maps, and calculations as to times of high and low water.

"Well, Sir," I began, "Jenkins and I have been into this business of the *Pultava* fairly extensively now, and I must confess that I'm not at all sure what is the best thing to do. At times I feel that there may be something important in it, and at other times—well—I begin to wonder if the whole thing isn't just a mare's nest. I don't know what Jenkins really thinks, Sir, but I've brought him along, and I thought that the best thing to do, if you can spare the time, is to discuss it with you as far as we have gone, and perhaps you can give a sort of outside opinion as to its merits."

"All right, David, this lot can wait," he replied, thrusting a pile of correspondence to one side. "I see you've

brought everything along. Let's hear how you've got on."

"As far as I can see, the only real evidence which we've got, Sir, was the sighting of this yacht, the *Dragonfly*, alongside the Russian coaster *Pultava* in the Skagerrak about eighteen months or more ago. That's the only really suspicious or sinister fact, and that has been partially corroborated by reports from other sources which indicate that the vessel was in those waters on or about the same date. Apart from this, however, all we have are a number of suspicious circumstances, coincidences perhaps. The movements of the *Dragonfly* on two occasions witnessed by myself last summer, and the fact that the principle owner of *Dragonfly*, Alexander Maitland, was dismissed from the R.N.V.R. after some shady dealings with the mess funds when serving in North Russia. On the other hand, James Batt, his co-partner, seems to off-set this with a good record, and he holds a number of responsible posts on the boards of quite a number of reputable firms. One of which is on the Special List, which means that he, at anyrate, is o.k. from the security point of view.

"Now Sir," I continued, spreading out the chart, "the place from where I saw *Dragonfly's* dinghy coming out in the middle of a wet and stormy night, was right here off this stretch called Denghie Flats."

"It's a pretty impossible looking place," commented the Captain, as he ran his eye up and down the chart.

"Yes, Sir, that's what roused my suspicions in the first instance and I thought that to start with we ought to reconnoitre that bit of coast from the landward side. So Jenkins and I sallied out on Monday by car and had a look. I can only say that it's even worse than it appears on the chart. Don't you agree, Jenkins?"

"Yes, indeed, Sir," agreed my assistant dutifully, "it's a most dreary stretch of coast."

"At first we concluded that all this strip of salt marsh here would be practically impossible, or at least extremely difficult, but we walked down to this outfall here, and there is no doubt you could get a boat in there. It would be difficult at night, of course, but not impossible. As you can see, there is a trace of a channel shown on the chart, just to seaward."

I looked up and noticed that Captain Thoroughgood was studying the chart carefully with a magnifying glass.

"It's a narrow winding channel through the saltings, quite dry when we saw it except for a small trickle that drains through the sea wall. But, as far as we could see, it fills right up to where we stood, at high water springs. Indeed, at the very top of the tide we estimated that you'd have about three or four feet."

"Then you consider it would be quite a practical landing place, David, is that it? And what do you think, Jenkins?"

"Well, Sir," he replied, "I agree you could get in all right. Though it would be very difficult to find the entrance from out to seaward, and I can't imagine anything worse than floundering about all night in this morass if you lost the way. On the other hand, it's an extremely deserted bit of coast, and I should imagine the last place the coastguards would watch. From a smuggling point of view, I should think it quite promising."

"I see," commented Thoroughgood, running his eye up and down the chart again. "It certainly seems to have possibilities, and as far as I can see it is far and away the most deserted strip of coast for miles. On the whole Thames Estuary, by the look of it. And if anyone were planning to smuggle, or run agents into the country, I can quite see they might well pick on a place like that. Eh, David?"

"Yes, Sir, that's what Jenkins and I thought, and it seemed to me that we ought to watch the place somehow."

I've been studying this ordnance map here," I said, unfolding the sheet I had brought in, "and I believe that if we could get a bit of help from the police we might spring some sort of trap."

"How do you propose to do that?"

"Well, Sir, we could stick Jenkins down on the sea wall with a pair of night glasses and a portable wireless set, and back here, near Latchingdon, you can see that there are only two roads out, and I thought we might put a police stop on them. It seems to me, if anything is going on, they would probably use a car or motor bike, and we might intercept them coming away."

"How close could a car get to this outfall, then?" asked the Captain.

"Oh, well, Sir, there is quite a good track right along on the landward side of the sea wall. It's grass covered, but quite firm. A motor bike could certainly use it, or a jeep for that matter. One could get within, say, twenty yards of the place. Actually we left our car at the farm and walked the last mile or so, but I believe we could have driven right down quite easily. Certainly, if I were planning a job like that, I would lay on some sort of transport. And I thought, Sir, that if I was with Jenkins, we could wireless back to these check points. If they had a car or a motor bike they'd have to pass by one road or the other. Unless, of course, they are using one of the farms as a base. Or, alternatively, if they were on foot, then we could try to follow them."

"How many weeks are we going to leave Jenkins lying out on the sea wall?" asked Thoroughgood, noting the expression on his face.

"Well, Sir," I replied, "it's not as bad as that. What I had in mind was this. First of all it's only possible to get in here at about the top three feet of high water springs. That narrows it down considerably. According to my calculation

there is only enough water there for about three days every fortnight, and for about three hours each tide. Then, of course, you would have to have your high tide during the hours of darkness. That narrows it a bit further. In fact, it reduces it to about three days each month."

"Then you are suggesting that for these three days we have this place sort of picketed."

"Well, yes, Sir, unless you have some better idea. This is only a suggestion. We could, of course, narrow it down still further by keeping a watch on the *Dragonfly*. We could easily arrange with the Customs to keep us posted whenever she clears. The snag to that, of course, is that it means telling a lot more people all about it."

"Never mind, it's a good idea, David. I think you are getting warmer. First of all we can work out the dates. Three days each month, you say? Well keep a watch on the ship and have everything ready. Then if she puts to sea just before the dates you've worked out, it seems to me it's a good bet. If she remains in harbour—we can have another think."

"Yes, Sir, but how about the police? You remember we didn't want the whole of Scotland Yard turning out. After all, it may be a false trail, and in any case, as far as we are concerned, if we are not careful we'll put the wind up these birds, and then that's the last we shall see of them. What we want to find out is how their organisation works. For all we know the *Dragonfly* might be only one of several other yachts on the job. As I see it, we want to find out their contacts on the other side; and find out a bit more about the *Pultava* for that matter, or any other ships that may be on the same racket. It would be a great pity to lose all this by giving the show away prematurely."

"Yes, there is something in what you say, David."

"I'm afraid, Sir, that if the police or the Customs start

taking charge. They will simply follow up and arrest someone on some charge and won't consider the Naval side of this. There may, of course, be nothing to it. It may only be a straightforward bit of smuggling, but it would be a pity if it was something more important and we missed it."

"Then, David, I think the best plan is for me to go over to Scotland Yard and fix this up on a personal basis. I don't know anyone over there, but I can easily arrange an interview. I'm sure if we put our point of view fully, we are more likely to get their co-operation. After all, this is our job really in the first place. Anyway, I think that's the best plan, and I'll go ahead with that. Meanwhile, perhaps you could work out more carefully exactly how you intend setting about this, and think out what you want the police to do. We'll have to give them fairly precise instructions, so that we can alert them at short notice. Then there's the Customs, too. You will have to think out how much to tell them, and so on. You had better have a code name for all this, in case we have to do any business over the phone."

"We have a code name already, Sir," I said proudly.

"You have, have you. Well, what is it?"

"Coverplan, Sir."

"Good, very appropriate," he replied. "Whose idea was that?"

"No one's, Sir, it was the next on the list allocated to this Division."

CHAPTER SIX

ALTHOUGH I had no particular desire to have Jenkins inviting himself on board *Fame* and finding out what I knew about Juliet and Susan, it would do no harm, I felt, if I were to pay them a visit myself. Accordingly I planned to look the Admiral up just after Christmas. After all, our plans for Denghie Marsh would probably not materialise till the Spring weather came along, and we might as well find out all we could in the meanwhile.

There were also other reasons why I quite looked forward to this visit. It would be a lonely Christmas for me all by myself, and although I didn't like to impose myself on the Mathews family for Christmas itself, if I could get down for the New Year I might perhaps take the girls out for some sort of New Year's party. I knew the Admiral would welcome any move in that direction.

And then there was the Admiral himself. He had always been very good to me in one way and another, and I liked to think that, by coming down for a short visit, it might help to cheer him up. It was all very well going out sailing in his boat during the Summer, he approved of that, of course, but I didn't see very much of him, and, indeed, if anything, it left him in a more lonely position than ever.

I checked through on our list of possible dates for

operation Coverplan, but it was well clear, and so I fixed up my visit over the phone.

It was a wet and blustery winter's day when I arrived at the Admiral's house, and found myself being greeted by Platt. Judging by the holly and the decorations they had been celebrating Christmas in the right spirit, and I was glad to find the Admiral himself in excellent form, in spite of his disabilities. He was still determined to put himself right.

"Those damned doctors," he insisted, "they're a pessimistic bunch. Defeatism, that's what their trouble is. I've a damned good mind to take *Fame* across the Atlantic just to show them."

He took me into the library or sitting-room where he was working on a model of the *Golden Hind*.

"I enjoy this," he continued, indicating the beautiful little ship lying half completed. "It keeps me occupied for hours. That damned fellow, Platt, keeps coming in to tell me dinner is ready. He doesn't seem to realise you can't leave a ship like this half rigged."

He looked up as Platt entered. "Ah! Here he is. How about the Commander's baggage, now?"

"I've taken that up, Sir. I just came in to let Commander Mackenzie know, Sir, that he will be in the same room as he was last time."

"Oh yes, Platt, that's good. And now I expect he'd like something to drink. What's happened to the children, Platt? They ought to be back."

"I dunno, Sir," he replied, "they was going to the meet at Wayward's Cross. It'll take 'em some time to get back from there, Sir."

I rather wanted to have a quiet talk with Platt some

time. It seemed to me that if I could get him alone and in the right frame of mind, his experiences on the Black Market might be worth investigating. However, I would have to wait my chance.

Meanwhile, the Admiral and I continued our conversation. I was glad to hear that he was, in fact, planning to go away during the Summer for a change. He hoped to stay at some convalescent home or sanatorium, either in the Isle of Wight or else perhaps even in Switzerland. This seemed to be an excellent plan, as not only would it give him something to look forward to, but of course he would also come under expert medical supervision.

For my part I took this early opportunity, while we were talking together, to suggest taking his daughters out to dinner, and dance too, if it were possible. The Admiral welcomed this, as I felt sure he would. I knew that one of his chief worries was that his daughters never seemed to go out anywhere. So, having settled that small conspiracy in advance, I went up to have a bath. I was indeed enjoying a good soak when Juliet and Susan returned from the hunting field, and we exchanged greetings by shouting at each other through the bathroom door.

"What's all this about having to go out dancing?" demanded Susan.

"There's nothing about having to, Susan," I protested. "Nor was I really proposing to dance. I merely hoped that you two would come out and dine with me on New Year's night, that was all."

"Count me in," called out Juliet. "I'd love to come, but you'd better leave Sue behind if she's going to be difficult."

I climbed out of the bath and started to towel myself down.

"I'm not being difficult," retorted Susan. "I'd like to come very much. I just didn't want to dance, that's all."

"Well, that's fixed then," I replied.

I stuck my head round the corner of the door and beheld the two cheerful, but grubby and tousled individuals who had come to greet me.

"You can't go looking like that, though!"

The following day we did the rounds. We looked at the ponies in the fields, we went for a walk, and we looked at *Fame* tucked away rather forlornly in her mud berth. I noticed that among the few boats still at their moorings was the *Dragonfly*. I didn't, of course, mention any of the investigations we had been making, but seeing her there gave me a good opportunity to put in a few casual questions about Maitland and Batt.

I started by asking if they had been out recently. Apparently not. Then I enquired whether she ever went into a mud berth, and then I asked where she fitted out, and so on. But I didn't really gather much useful information. I had a sort of uneasy feeling that they might still be concealing something from me, and I think they rather felt that I was trying to check up on their truthfulness. Certainly they seemed to be rather suspicious and guarded in their replies, so I changed the conversation.

My next task was to try to get hold of Platt, and that afternoon I sought him out in the potting shed. This was not going to be easy. I could anticipate in advance that his sense of loyalty to the Mathews family would not be lightly set aside, and I decided that I had better be straight and to the point.

I cleared my throat, "Platt, there is one matter on which I would like your guidance."

"Yes, Sir."

"If I may come straight to the point. I found that when I was away sailing in *Fame* during the summer, the young

ladies had been embarking on a little smuggling—on the side, as it were. In fact, I suppose it was rather more than a little."

I couldn't help noticing that, true to his service upbringing, he had quietly come to attention, and, no doubt, if he had been wearing one, he would have executed a smart 'off caps'.

"It's all right. It's all right," I repeated, to put him at his ease. "I wasn't going to blame anyone. But I just wanted to prevent any possible trouble arising."

He swallowed visibly, but said nothing.

"I understand that you knew something of this."

He remained silent a moment, summoning up his courage.

"Well?"

"I don't know as 'ow I ought to say anything," he announced, obviously eaten up with suspicion.

"Oh, come Platt, this is not the defaulters' table, or anything like that. I'm not going to tell the Admiral, I promised the young ladies I wouldn't. All I am really trying to do is to find out how many people know about this."

"No one knows, Sir," he replied cautiously. "I haven't told nobody, Sir, I promise."

"Don't look so worried, Platt. I'm not blaming you. Indeed, I'm trying to make sure that no more is heard of this. You see, when one starts a thing like this, and someone gets to hear of it, there is always a danger that they may try and blackmail you. You see what I mean?"

"Yes, Sir," he replied, relaxing a little.

"Well, when you disposed of this stuff, surely someone must have known who you were?"

"Yes, Sir, they know who I am, but they never knew who I got the stuff from."

"But don't you think they might guess?"

"Well, Sir, I told them as 'ow it was the *Dragonfly's* stuff."

"You did, did you? And who did you pass it on to?"

"Petty H'officer Slattery, Sir. 'E was the Captain's Coxswain when we was in the 'ighflyer."

"But is he still serving then?"

"No, Sir. When the war came to an end 'e took 'is twelve and now runs a public 'ouse in Colchester."

"What happens then?"

"I don't know, Sir. It goes up to London, I believe."

"Well, Platt, I hope Slattery can be relied on not to give you away."

"You can rely on 'im, Sir. H'absolutely, cross me 'eart. Why, Sir, when we was in the 'ighflyer . . ."

"Perhaps I'd better not know too much about that, Platt. But is Slattery the only contact you've had?"

"Well, Sir, them cigarettes. 'E wouldn't touch them, sir. Not 'arf 'e wouldn't. 'E said it was a bloody fool's business—begging your pardon, Sir—but 'e wouldn't look at them."

"And so?"

"Well, Sir, I 'ave me old mother what lives in Gillingham. When I went to see 'er I ran across the Chief Buffer and 'e knew a chum of 'is in the Yard."

"I see, and you are fairly happy that they would keep their mouths shut?"

"Oh, yessir, they're 'onest as the day's long."

I offered him a cigarette. The effect was magical. No longer was it Petty Officer J. S. Platt, Official No. C/JX 62675, Officers Steward First Class, pace forward—march—off caps. He suddenly relaxed and became, well, just Platt. The gentleman's gentleman, cum gardener, cum chauffeur. I wished I'd given him one before.

He gave one parting look of embarrassment when he said that he hoped I wouldn't tell the young ladies, and that he'd always tried to make sure no trouble would come of it.

Dear, faithful Platt. I assured him on that point, and also told him how relieved I was that he had been so careful. Indeed, it was a relief. I had always rather feared that he might have got badly mixed up in the sort of black market gang of spivs that seemed to appear from nowhere when the war ended. The sort, no doubt, that Batt associated with. Platt's associates might be pretty good rascals in their way, but they were the sort you could trust. The sort you don't seem to get nowadays. The sort that were up to every trick of the trade, but who would never let you down.

I tried to find out if Platt knew anything about the *Dragonfly* or her crew. Hoping that perhaps there might be some interesting gossip going around the village. But he evidently knew very little. They were odd folk, he thought. The shorter of the two didn't seem such a bad sort and was quite popular in the village, but the taller one didn't seem to mix much. Platt knew they were in the trade, but only, I gathered, because the girls had told him. There didn't seem to be much more to find out, but I was very glad I'd had it out with Platt. I thanked him warmly, and warned him not to say a word to anyone, but to let me know at once if anyone started asking questions, or anything like that.

"I'll keep me trap shut, Sir," were his parting words. "You can rely on me h'absolutely, Sir, I promise. I wouldn't see no 'arm come to the young ladies, not for all the tea in China, Sir."

The party that night was great fun, really. The Admiral positively insisted on his daughters having a good powerful

cocktail before we started. "Even if it's the last they ever have," he commented. And we started off in gay spirits to see the New Year in. The girls had done a miraculous transformation since yesterday, and I really felt rather proud of my two charges as we entered the Broadsands Hotel at Frinton, and enquired after our table.

While I was still doing this I heard the sounds of greetings and introductions behind me and, turning round, I saw the girls being effusively welcomed by a man and his wife. The former, who was shaking Juliet warmly by the hand, looked like an R.A.F. type. Juliet introduced them as Squadron Leader and Mrs. Turnbull, who owned a boat called the *Firecrest*. I gathered the girls had quite frequently met them out sailing. I think they kept their boat at Heybridge Basin or somewhere fairly close.

"How about joining us for a drink?" I said, as I called the waiter over.

The Squadron Leader and his wife had just come back from a fortnight's leave in Switzerland, and were lamenting the fact that they hadn't been able to stay longer.

"Have you been out there before?" I enquired, by way of conversation.

"No," she replied. "It was our first visit to Switzerland. My husband went to Austria the year before last, but I have always had to look after the family."

"Which do you prefer?" I asked the Squadron Leader.

"Oh, well, I like Switzerland," he replied. "The trouble is it's inclined to be more expensive, unless you know the ropes."

"What ropes?" put in Susan bluntly.

I was a little doubtful if the Squadron Leader was likely to exert a good influence. I felt sure he was up to every conceivable currency racket.

"Oh, well, there is no great secret," he said airily. "In

fact, I don't know why more people don't do it, but if you're thinking of going out there, the thing to do is to go to Austria first, change your traveller's cheques there into Austrian money, and then change the Austrian money into Swiss. You get very nearly double that way. Sometimes you have to work the racket the other way round, it all depends. I know a bloke," he continued, "who not only had a first-class holiday there, but ended up with what he started."

. "What happens if you get caught?" I asked. "Isn't it all marked in your passport?"

"It's perfectly legal," he said, stroking a long handlebar moustache. "I know dozens of chaps who are doing it. The Bank of England knows all about it, and it's up to them, I presume, to stop it if they want to."

"Are you sure it's quite legal, Chris?" asked his wife somewhat doubtfully.

"Of course it is, Sally," he replied. "Smokey went along and asked his bank. Anyhow, I shouldn't cavil too much if I were you, otherwise I won't be able to take you out again.

"How about a drink, Sir?" he enquired, looking round and beckoning the waiter. "Down to the Bank of England. You must let me introduce you to one of my specials.

"Waiter," he called, "we want five of those 'Flaming Glories'."

"Don't order one for me," echoed the girls simultaneously.

"Oh, come on," replied the Squadron Leader. "They're absolutely harmless, like mother's milk, I promise you. You wouldn't know the difference."

Presently five seductive looking cocktails arrived, and we lifted them to our lips. A corrosive stream trickled down my gullet, Susan spluttered slightly and very nearly did the

nose trick. The handlebars twitched imperceptibly, and we resumed our conversation.

"It sounds quite plausible, but I'm not sure I'd particularly care to risk it," I said, thinking that perhaps we'd better turn the conversation on some subject other than means of defrauding the revenue. But he was not to be put off.

"Well, look here," he said, "all you've got to do is to buy up some nylons here and sell them on your way through France. You can get double price. We're hoping to pay for a weekend in Paris that way, aren't we, Sally?"

"Won't you get pinched by the French Customs?" I enquired.

"Good lor', no," he answered. "They're on strike at the moment. In any case, you can always get through if you know how."

As I feared, the girls were beginning to take an unhealthy interest in the conversation, and I could feel that they already regarded the Squadron Leader as too much of a kindred spirit.

"You mustn't let Chris lead you astray," said his wife. "I am afraid it's in his blood, but I've told him he's bound to be caught sooner or later."

But Chris was in an expansive frame of mind. The 'Flaming Glory' seemed to be working well.

"There are no end of possibilities," he said, "if you look around. Good Lord, I know a bloke who could mint a fortune if he had any sense. He's got one of those Air Sea Rescue craft. It only takes him about fifty minutes to get over to Le Touquet. My God, if I'd got a bus like that . . ."

"Now, Chris," said his wife, interrupting, "you know perfectly well, if that were possible it would have been thought of long ago."

This was beginning to get rather too near the mark, and I was beginning to wonder how I could effect a withdrawal. The handlebars, I noticed, no longer hung in the racing posture, but were rising defiantly. Soon they would be circumscribing the 'V' sign. No doubt Sally was well versed in the precursory signs.

"Of course it's been thought of," he said, "but how can you expect a fellow like old Trouncer to outwit the Customs. Why, he couldn't even water the baby's milk without the nanny finding out. There he is with a wizard bus, but all he does it to go round whining because it's too expensive to run. My God, if I could get someone to help me. There must be dozens . . ."

Susan choked, and Juliet thumped her on the back.

"I'm afraid your 'Flaming Glory' went down the wrong way," she said, apologising.

"It was badly mixed," he said. "They never shake them enough. Let me order you another. The second one always tastes better than the first."

"No, no, I won't, really," pleaded Susan, recovering rapidly. "I don't usually drink at all."

"Neither of us do really," added Juliet, coming to her sister's rescue. "We were interested in what you were saying."

"Look here," I said, breaking into the conversation. "Unless we go now, we'll be late for dinner. It was very interesting what you were saying, Squadron Leader, and we'll be seeing you again I expect." With that I piloted the girls off to the dining-room.

"Well, there you are," I said as soon as we were clear, "just the sort of plausible rascal you girls fall for. Another Maitland. Now you see how stupid it all sounds, and his poor wife following him round, wondering every minute if he's going to be pinched by the police. I'm sorry

that the first person we should run into should have been like that."

"It was quite interesting, what he said about changing one's money," said Juliet. "Do you think there is anything in it, Uncle David?"

"Well, I don't know. It just seems to be rather dishonest, that's all."

"What a wonderful moustache, Uncle David. I wonder if it's difficult to grow them like that?"

"I don't know, Juliet. I've never tried, but I must say there are some interesting characters around. One could write a book about them."

When we reached our table, the band was playing enthusiastically, and quite a number of couples had already taken to the floor, but true to my promise I concentrated strictly on the meal.

From where I was sitting I couldn't see the other diners without swivelling more or less right round in my chair, but the girls were vastly intrigued in all sorts of peculiar people they saw, and kept up a running fire of speculation as to who they were, and what they were doing. I wondered if their friend from the *Firecrest* would come and ask either of them for a dance, but apparently he was still in the bar.

As the dancers came round to our end of the floor, I could observe them more accurately, and join in the general discussion with Juliet and Susan.

As might be expected, there were all sorts present. There was a foreign couple, or anyhow, they appeared foreign. Even my untutored eye could see at a glance that their standard of dancing was far above that of anyone else in the room. Perhaps they were professionals out on a busman's holiday. And then there was a comic little man with a bald head and thick glasses. The girls nicknamed him the 'Banker'. Certainly he was an obvious caricature of a

typical business man, who can't dance, and who in any case had quite the wrong figure for the dance floor. His partner, a tall and angular looking blonde, towered over him like a ship in a fresh breeze. They wafted past with a strong whiff of stale scent, and disappeared from my field of vision, till they came round once more.

Then there were a number of young couples who appeared to have all come from one large party. They seemed to infect the proceedings with a more cheerful and vigorous atmosphere, and were all set for a rowdy evening. They had already attracted the interest of the manager of the place, who had obviously been trying to exert a quietening influence on them. All these various and assorted elements were eagerly discussed by my two companions.

"There is a dashing looking man right behind you, Uncle David," remarked Juliet. "You can't see him, but he looks a pretty gay dog."

"Yes," added Susan, "I should think the girl with him must be a film actress, by the look of her."

I began to feel an interest, and tried to peer round over my shoulder, but they were right behind me.

"Gosh! Look at her nails," said Susan, in a tone of disgust. "I'm glad I don't have to go round looking like that."

"Her hair is rather dashing," added Juliet, not quite so scornfully. "Pity you can't see her, Uncle David, I'm sure she's just your type."

"Monkey," I replied. "What do you mean, my type?"

"Well, she looks what you call sophisticated, I imagine. Just the sort you men fall for, as a rule." She laughed and looked at me with a gay twinkle in her eye. "I'd love to see you swept off your feet, Uncle David. I'm sure you're not nearly so stern and straight-laced as you appear to be."

"Why aren't you drinking, Uncle David?" added Susan. "You are always pressing us to drink. Now it's our turn to see that you enjoy yourself."

Before I could stop them, they had hailed the waiter over, and I found myself ordering a bottle of wine.

However, I insisted on the two of them having a glass as well, 'Flaming Glory' or no 'Flaming Glory'. We were just about to drink a toast to the *Fame* when Susan suddenly spluttered, "Good heavens, look at that!"

We all looked round and there on the farther side of the dance floor, I noticed a couple dancing cheek to cheek.

"Revolting!" added Susan.

They were certainly what I should call going well, with their heads pressed together and swaying ecstatically. The man had his back turned, but the woman was obviously most striking, even allowing for the skilful make-up.

"They are the couple from just behind you, Uncle David," said Juliet.

She was wearing a dress made of a sort of flimsy half-transparent material of golden colour. Well off the shoulder, and her hair, which I suppose was cut short, stood out in all directions as a mass of curls—well dressed with henna. The girls couldn't take their eyes off her, and I watched fascinated as the couple slowly gyrated in a clockwise direction. As they turned I thought at first that the man had fallen asleep. Then suddenly I recognised Jenkins. This was frightful. I didn't want to get mixed up with his blonde. Nor did I particularly relish the prospect of having to introduce him to the girls. I'd probably have to ask him to join our table. The next thing I would be expected to do would be to ask that apparition to dance. That would be the end. I cast desperately round, but there seemed to be no escape. I could only hope that he would be so drunk with the smell of her perfume that he'd pass by without

noticing us. To my dismay, however, the band stopped, and before I could turn the other way, he had come out of his trance and had spotted me. He waved cheerfully, but by sheer good fortune, just then one of the other couples went over to speak to them and they all wandered off to the bar. That was providential.

"Good gracious, you don't mean to say you know that man," commented Susan. "You are a dark horse. Who on earth is he?"

"Oh, well, I don't really know him, but he is a young fellow who—well—works at the Admiralty, that's all."

"But how about the girl with him?" asked Juliet.

"Ah! That's something I'd like to know."

Our conversation was disturbed by a clash of cymbals, and the band striking up Old Lang Syne.

As soon as the New Year's celebrations were over I hurried the girls off and we managed to get away without seeing Jenkins.

The next day I was back in my Admiralty office.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE telephone rang on my desk. I put down my pen and lifted the receiver. "N.I.D. Twelve," I said mechanically. "Who? Yes, Commander Mackenzie speaking. From where? From Brightlingsea. Oh, yes, put it through "

There were a series of metallic clicks, and then a pause. Who on earth was ringing me from Brightlingsea? Then I suddenly remembered the *Dragonfly*, and quickly thumbed through my desk diary. Yes, indeed, just a week before the next high water period. My pulse quickened. There were some more clicks in the receiver, and a distant metallic voice spoke.

"Is that Commander Mackenzie?"

"Yes, Mackenzie speaking," I replied quickly.

"This is the Customs House, Brightlingsea," it resumed. "We have been instructed to give you a message. Can you hear?"

"Yes," I replied. "What is it? I can hear all right."

"The message reads," continued the far-off voice. "Yacht with signal letters B.K.R.M. cleared this evening for Kristiansand South, message ends." I slammed down the receiver.

"Jenkins," I called. "Jenkins!"

A muffled hail came from the door opposite and Jenkins shambled across to my office. "Yes, Sir," he said, looking a bit startled.

"Coverplan, Jenkins! Coverplan!"

He looked at me vacantly. "Cover what, Sir?" he stammered.

"Coverplan, you B.F. Have you forgotten? The *Dragonfly*, the *Pultava*, Denghie Flats. . . . Wake up, man. Don't stand there like an oaf."

"Oh, *Coverplan*," he repeated, light dawning on his countenance. "Yes, Sir, certainly. I was thinking of something else. I'll get the orders, they are in the safe. We have three phone calls to make. I'll go and get the orders."

He returned a moment later with a folder. "Yes, Sir," he said, resuming his usual air of imperturbability. "Here they are. The Essex County Police, Inspector Halford; Scotland Yard, Superintendent Rycroft; and in the Admiralty, Sir, there is Commander Hope, who was to let us have a portable transmitter/receiver."

"Good, Jenkins, what else have we got to do? There's no need to panic, we've got plenty of time to think this out carefully. I only hope that after waiting all these weeks they will know what we are talking about."

"They should know, Sir. Both in the December and January period I got on to these three by way of a reminder, and told them we had no news. They seemed to be quite alert."

"Good, then let's work out dates, and I will let the Captain know while you fix up with the others. Let's see, it's the 28th February today, and she's cleared for Norway. It'll take her about three days to get there, one day messing around, and four days back against the prevailing wind. She seems to have allowed a great deal of time."

"Well, they have to allow for head winds and other delays, Sir. I expect they like to have a bit in hand. They'd look pretty stupid if they missed the tide."

"Yes, I suppose you're right. Anyhow, the earliest they are likely to be back is in eight days. You'd better check up.

on distances, Jenkins, and allow them 150 miles a day. They won't average more. But if we give them eight or nine days, that brings us to the 8th March. By our calculations, the earliest they can get in is the 12th, and if they don't get in by the night of the 15th, they've missed it. It does fit in fairly well really, I suppose. Somehow I hadn't expected them to leave quite so much in advance, but when you work it out, I suppose they have to."

"Of course it depends, Sir, on whether they are working from Scandinavia or Holland. I think that I had better check up on our tides, and also the distances. It won't take me long, and then we can set the plan going without having to make alterations."

He's a cool customer, I thought as he left. No sign of emotion or excitement. I wonder what really goes on in his mind. Still thinking of something different, I expect. I paced up and down my office restlessly. It was getting late. I looked out of my window across the courtyard. A pretty cheerless looking evening, I thought. I hope it's better than this for our seaside excursion. I wondered what luck we'd have. It would be a bit of a scoop if we really did bowl them out. I wondered if we'd thought of everything.

I sat down at my desk and began to contemplate the time of year. March is early for legitimate yachting, I thought. That alone is a bit suspicious. If *Fame* were in the water we might have taken her round to the Ray Sand Channel with another portable set. I hadn't thought of that before. It would be too late to do it now, I realised. She's probably laid up and if we started to rush her out at this time of year, it would be the talk of the town. But certainly later on it would be an idea. In April or May, for instance. Perhaps we could get her afloat a bit earlier than usual. I'll write a short note to Juliet now, I thought. No need to say why. I'll just say it's Easter leave and ask them to make a

special effort. I was licking up the envelope as Jenkins returned.

"Well, you're looking pretty pleased with yourself," I said, noticing the satisfied look on his face. "How's it worked out?"

"Coverdown has won the 3-30, Sir," he said jubilantly.

"Blast you and your 3-30! How about the business of the day?"

"Oh, that's all right, Sir. I've checked over the tides. It should be a moonlight night, which will make it easier for them to find the creek. I see that they have cleared for South Norway, but, of course, I suppose they would actually contact their friends farther up in the Skagerrak."

"Yes, I think so. The only rendezvous we suspect is on the Swedish coast."

"Well, Sir, I think we can safely allow her two days lining up for her rendezvous and getting clear. She's bound to allow something for delays. On that basis she won't be back before the night of the 9th, and with head winds likely on the return trip, it's much more likely to be the 11th or 12th."

"All right then, Jenkins, we had better stick to our calculations and bring 'Coverplan' into force on the 12th, 13th and 14th. I'll go and tell the captain, and as soon as he's given his approval you can get busy on the phone. As far as we ourselves are concerned, we can drive down in my car. I think we might stock up with some creature comforts for the night watches. It's going to be a pretty cheerless watch until things start happening."

"I was thinking," he replied, "that it would be a lot easier if we could find some sort of accommodation near the scene. There are quite a number of farms marked on the map. We'll probably feel too sleepy to drive backwards

and forwards each day. Or we could put up at some pub."

"A very practical consideration, Jenkins. Some time during the next week, you'd better see what you can do. We don't want to start too much gossip, though. Don't forget we will be in all day and out all night brandishing wireless sets and binoculars."

"We can always pretend we are wild fowlers, Sir, doing a bit of flighting."

"All right, then, as long as I don't get mixed up with any of your bird-watching friends, I don't mind. I don't want to spend the day discussing why the bittern booms, or the difference between the male and the female spoonbill. You'd better make sure that it's not the nesting season or anything like that. And no messing around with the barmaids or farmers' daughters, Jenkins. This is not one of your trips to Frinton or Fécamp. In fact, on second thoughts, I think it would be safer to make use of one of those disused Nissen huts we saw, or a hay stack."

"As you like, Sir," said Jenkins resignedly. "I'll take a look round on my motor bike."

The appointed day dawned cold and clear as we set out once more for the east coast. In spite of the ten days wait, I think even Jenkins felt a slight sense of adventure.

Juliet had replied to my letter and welcomed my suggestion of an Easter cruise enthusiastically. *Fame* was still in her mud berth, but they saw no reason why they couldn't get her ready by then. At the worst it would mean there wouldn't be time to paint the top sides, but they could always finish that off during the summer. I was glad they were keen about it. I would look forward to a sail whatever happened. However, my thoughts were interrupted by Jenkins.

"I've booked a haystack, Sir, in case it's fine, and in case it's wet a Nissen hut."

"Good, I'm glad to hear that. I think we might go there right away and inspect the premises, then we can dump our belongings after we've made our choice."

We arrived at the Nissen hut first. Not a very cheerful looking place, I thought.

"Was this the best you could find, Jenkins?" I peered in and noticed that the door was missing and only about half the glass remained in the windows. "What's that heap in the corner?"

"That, Sir, is a heap of hay."

"It looks as if it's several years old," I remarked, giving it a poke. Something moved—"It seems a bit musty to me—aren't there any better ones, Jenkins?"

"Well, there are, Sir, but they are in use, and I thought that if you were going to be up all night you'd rather not be disturbed during the day. It might be difficult to explain, Sir, why two Naval officers should be sleeping out here in a Nissen hut. But there is another one about a mile further north, you might prefer that, Sir. It would certainly be warmer."

"Why did you choose this, then?"

"Well, Sir, I didn't know how particular you were when out camping. The other one is full of manure."

"I think, Jenkins, I am what you describe as particular. Perhaps we'd better inspect the haystack."

"Very good, Sir, it's not far from here. The only snag is that we can't get the car very near and we'll have to carry our baggage."

We proceeded on foot across two fields, and came across an impressive row of eight full-size hayricks.

"This looks better," I said, as we proceeded to carry out our inspection.

At the end we came across the one that was being used. It had been cut half way back, leaving a kind of step or rump of soft dry hay, into which we sank up to our knees as we scrambled to the top.

"Splendid, Jenkins, this is the place for me. We'll have to take a chance on visitors. After all, we're not blasted fugitives, and as far as the rain is concerned, this is more or less sheltered from the west."

That having been decided, we returned to the car, where I then left Jenkins to ferry our belongings to our quarters. Meanwhile I drove off to contact the police.

It was close on tea time when I returned, and climbed up on to the rick. Jenkins was well buried in the hay, reading a French novel. I must say he had arranged our bivouac with great thoroughness. Sleeping bags, ground sheet, a suit case of provisions, water bottles—were all hidden in the hay.

"You seem to have arranged things very comfortably," I said approvingly.

"It's not as good as I should have liked," he replied. "I didn't think it was safe to have the primus up here, and so I am afraid that we have to climb down to do our cooking, under the shelter of the hedge. I've tested out the wireless set," he added, "and I think everything is now more or less in order."

There was nothing much to do and we lay about till half past nine, when we topped up with some hot stew, and set out for the car. There we parted company, Jenkins to help with the police patrol, while I set out for the sea wall, clad in a duffle coat, several sweaters, the portable wireless slung over my back, night glasses, woolly hat and pockets stuffed with a thermos, and, last but not least, a slab of chocolate and some biscuits.

"Well, Jenkins," I said. "I will test through on this set

at half-past ten, and again at midnight, and will let you know if I see anything. We don't know what may happen, so you'll have to keep your wits about you, and use your initiative. And don't forget the police are there to do as we tell them. I understand they are quite agreeable, but it means that we are in charge. All we want is to try to find out what's going on, and we particularly don't want to raise their suspicions. All the police need say is that they are looking for a stolen car. If you find me with my throat cut in the morning, you'll know we are on the trail. Tomorrow night we'll change jobs."

"Good luck, Sir," said Jenkins, "and good hunting." And with that we parted on our ways.

I plodded down towards the sea wall in my heavily clad state, feeling very glad that it was a fine night. The moon had risen and every now and then burst through the clouds to light me on my way. I was glad it was only a mile, I thought, beginning to feel the weight of the wireless and my duffle coat, and beginning to realise too, that sea boots are not the best footwear for a long trudge.

Presently I could see that I was nearing the sea wall. It looked like a long straight shadow running right along the horizon before me, and I was just thinking that it must be closer than it looked, when I suddenly realised there were two men not far ahead. It must have been the slight movement that caught my eye. I immediately crouched and remained motionless. They looked closer than I had thought. This was a bit awkward. My heart was pounding, partly from exertion and partly from a feeling of sudden and tense excitement. Somehow I hadn't expected them nearly so early, and I was just wondering if they had heard me when I realised they were advancing in my direction. I crawled sideways towards the ditch, hardly daring to raise my head. It was too late to unhitch the wireless on my

back, so I lay flat with my face to the ground. It was not possible to estimate how many there were, as they were quite silent. From the sound of their footsteps, scarcely audible on the turf, it seemed as if they were loitering about or strolling slowly along the track. I lay like that for some moments, then there was a sort of tearing noise. Cautiously I raised my head and peered through the long grass. There, in the full light of the moon not more than fifteen or twenty paces away, was a solitary cow munching grass.

"Damn the animal," I muttered to myself as I rose and continued on to the sea wall. "I'm glad Jenkins wasn't there to laugh at me."

I climbed to the top and walked along the embankment till I found the creek we had visited previously. It was still obviously several hours till the tide came in, and I cast around for somewhere to hide. There wasn't any cover, but eventually, after trying one or two places, I took up my position on the seaward side about thirty yards to the north of the creek. Far enough off, I hoped, for me to remain unseen. There I unloaded my wireless, and looked at my watch. It was nearly half-past nine, and I settled down for my long wait.

The sky cleared, leaving the whole scene bathed in a cold, silvery moonlight. At first I was warm with exertion, and thought I had piled on too much in the way of sweaters, but it was not long before I realised it was going to be a good deal colder than I had expected. According to our calculations, no boat could get in before about midnight, so that there was some time before I could expect anything. I tested through communications as arranged, and had a word with Jenkins.

By one o'clock the moon had moved sufficiently far over to the west to leave me in shadow, and I felt less conspicuous. It was mighty cold though, freezing hard by the

feel of it, which, together with a light breeze that had sprung up from the north, froze me through to the marrow. I felt chilled and numb, and would dearly have liked to have paced up and down or gone for a run. But now I realised it was the bewitching hour when something might happen. The night seemed interminable. I drank my coffee out of my thermos, and looked at my watch repeatedly. At three o'clock I decided to risk having a closer look at the creek, and, stooping as low as I could, walked cautiously over. There was still a little water, but hardly enough, I should have thought, to warrant their taking a risk now. I waited about for another half hour, however, just to make sure, and then passed back a message to the others to say that I was packing up.

That was the first night. I must confess that it was a cold and cheerless performance, and I couldn't help feeling a bit discouraged, although it was unreasonable to expect things to start happening straight away. No doubt, I reflected, we would have to put up with many disappointments before we were lucky. As I wandered back I thought of all the other places on the shores of England where they might be landing, and wondered whether there wasn't some better way of coming to grips. Next night, anyhow, it would be Jenkins' turn out on the sea wall, but one thing was clear in my mind, and that was that I was going to have a good hot bath. No more haystack for me. We'd damned well go off to a hotel and be blowed. I collected Jenkins and then we bundled our gear into the car and off we set.

"If they are curious, Jenkins, we can try out your bird watching business," I reminded him, as we drove inland well away from the scene of our activities. "I suppose people do watch birds by night."

However, in the outcome we had no trouble from

curious questioners, and that evening, cleaned and well refreshed, we returned to take up our positions. It was, thank goodness, Jenkins' turn on the sea wall, and I drove him down there first, and wished him a successful night. The tides being later, we did not reckon on setting watch till eleven, so that it was past ten when we parted. Jenkins to his sea wall, and I to keep my rendezvous with the police at Latchingdon Church.

When I got there I found the police already waiting for their instructions. There was quite a squad, with two police cars and six constables in all, including the drivers. Sam Thoroughgood's personal contact seemed to have evoked their wholehearted co-operation, and my spirits were high, as I couldn't help feeling that this was the most promising of the three nights. Sergeant Barford was in charge, and at once came over and reported to me for his instructions.

"Well, Sergeant, I think we'll do the same as before. This is the most likely route, I think, so I suggest you remain here with me and that we send the other car off to picket the southern road. When they are in position, I'll go and pay them a visit, but it is only a lane really, and unless these people suspect we are here, I hardly think they'd go that way. These two roads, as I expect you realise, more or less seal off this peninsular. Unless they take a ferry over the Crouch or travel by train, we should intercept them. I hope, Sergeant, you've cautioned your men not to gossip about this among their chums."

"Oh, yes, Sir. I've told them to keep their mouths shut. But you needn't worry, they're accustomed to doing odd jobs, and they've been told not to worry their blooming heads about what we're doing this for, but to get on with the job. And I've told them, Sir, that all they have to do is to stop all vehicles travelling towards London and take

down particulars as to names of drivers and passengers or cargo, and where they are travelling to and from. The other officer last night said that was what you wanted."

"Perfectly correct, Sergeant Barford. I don't think there's anything to add. Except that we are more particularly interested, I think, in jeeps or motor bicycles. I should perhaps explain to you that we have reports of suspicious activities going on along this bit of coast, but we particularly don't want to raise any sort of scare by creating too much of a rumpus before we find out a bit more about it. I'm hoping that they'll only think we are after a stolen car. It should, however, give us some useful information."

"Well, Sir, I more or less guessed it must be something of the sort, but we never ask no questions. And now I think I'd better get the others off. It's just about midnight, Sir, and perhaps you'd like to have a word with Mr. Jenkins from this car."

While Sergeant Barford, therefore, detailed off the other picket, I climbed into his seat alongside the driver.

"I don't think there is anything to report, Sir," said the driver, "but Mr. Jenkins says he would like a word with you."

I took over the hand set, and spoke to Jenkins for a few minutes. He spent the whole time impressing on me how cold it was, which I could well realise. Then I went off to visit the other car.

When I got there I found the party alert and watchful, and apparently quite happy about their orders. So, after a few minutes with them, I walked back up the road to Latchingdon.

It was another beautiful moonlight night, but this time without a cloud in the sky, and if anything colder. I could see the frost sparkling in the grass at the road side as I walked along. It was all right as long as one kept moving,

but I could well imagine Jenkins shivering away on the sea wall, and cursing me for having laid this on.

When I got back to Sergeant Barford the time was about half past one. Just about the time, I reflected, when something might happen. I hadn't been back more than about ten minutes when one of the constables called out, "Here you are, Sir," and I quickly scrambled into the car and seized the hand set eagerly.

"Yes, Jenkins," I said.

"There's someone here," he replied. Then there was a pause followed by, "I can't see anything, but I can hear voices."

He was just about to say something when I heard him exclaim, "Blast it!" Then followed a clatter as if he'd dropped the receiver. After which, dead silence. I called him for some minutes hopefully, but there was nothing more, not a sound.

"That seemed a bit ominous to me, Sergeant," I said to Barford, who had been listening just behind me. "There's something or other going on down there."

"Yes, Sir, I didn't like the sound of it myself. He should have had someone along with him."

I was suddenly filled with the worst misgivings. Of course he ought to have had someone with him, but it was too late to reflect on that now. We had to do something quickly.

"Look here, Sergeant Barford," I said, after a moment's reflection, and trying to appear calm and unemotional. "I want you to come with me; I am going to see what the trouble is. Possibly something serious has happened. I think it had better be you. Can you come along in my car and leave someone in charge here. I think it's particularly important to keep the roads still picketed."

"Very good, Sir. Whatever you say, but I think it might

be wise to collect a constable from the other car as well. It's more or less on the way."

"Yes, Barford. A good idea. We don't want the same thing to happen to us."

In a few minutes we had collected our escort and were speeding on our way to the place where Jenkins and I had parted. It was a maddening road, dead straight for about half a mile, and then, with no warning, a right angle bend, followed by another bit of straight and then another sharp turn, and so on all the way. I suppose originally it had been a footpath or farm track following round the edges of the fields. Anyhow, in my anxious frame of mind it seemed interminable. In fact, I suppose it only took us about twenty minutes before we came to the fields. Ignoring the notice marked 'Private Property' and the farmyard dog, I switched off our lights and drove right across fields along the track, and right up to the sea wall, which we could see clearly in the moonlight. The hard frosty ground made good going.

As soon as I got there I drew up and jumped out and, without waiting for the others, I scrambled to the top of the embankment. There was nothing to be seen. It was still bright moonlight, almost like day, in fact. I looked down into the creek and noticed that there was still plenty of water, but nothing stirred. The others stayed by the car, awaiting my instructions. I remained there for a moment uncertain what to do.

"Jenkins," I called out. But there was no answer. An icy feeling began to grip my heart. There was something eerie about calling into the night, and I wondered what Barford and his constable were thinking. I was just about to hail again when something stirred out in the marsh, not very far away, and a voice called out, "Is that you, Sir?"

"Jenkins, thank heavens you're alive! What's happened? Why didn't you answer me?"

By that time Jenkins was on his feet and in the moonlight looked like a great bear shambling towards me.

"I'm quite all right, Sir. I'm sorry if I've given you a scare, but the blighters turned the dog on me . . ."

"Dog? Good Lord, Jenkins, you're all covered in mud!"

"Yes, Sir, I was just talking to you when I saw the damned thing bounding towards me. It was a ruddy great beast. About the size of a bloodhound. It came up to within about ten feet of my face and stood there snarling. I'm afraid it took me completely by surprise, Sir, and I sprang to my feet with the 'portable' and took to the marshes."

It was such a relief to find Jenkins alive, and to hear him talking, that I was in no mood to be angry, besides which remembering the cow the night before felt that I might well have done the same.

"Yes, I can see you've been camouflaging yourself," I replied, noticing that he was caked in mud from head to foot. In fact, his face looked completely black in the half light, with two little peepholes where his eyes were blinking at me. "But, tell me, did they see you?"

"No, Sir, I don't think so. When I legged it they were on the other side of the sea wall and, fortunately for me, the blasted animal didn't follow across the mud. I went jumping across from tuft to tuft, and I suppose the beast funk'd it. Unfortunately, I hadn't gone far when I tripped up and went face foremost into it."

"You look a bit splashed I must say, Jenkins."

"Yes, Sir, it got in my eyes and up my nose, and it was some time before I could see what was happening. Fortunately, I was well hidden in the hollow I'd fallen into. As far as I could tell, Sir, there were about three of them. They didn't remain long, but I managed to have a good look at them through my binoculars, as they scrambled back over the sea wall. It looked to me very much as if they were

armed." By this time Jenkins and I had returned to the car, where the two policemen were waiting, but Jenkins continued his narrative. "Anyhow, Sir, as soon as they'd disappeared over the other side, I returned to the sea wall and was just in time to see them drive off."

"What sort of car was it?"

"Well, Sir, it was a small truck as far as I could see. Probably a jeep by the sound of it. They went off in a southerly direction. Not the way you came. They'd only been gone about ten minutes when I heard you coming. I thought it might be them coming back, so I took to the marshes again."

"Well, Sergeant, it looks as if we have just missed these birds. I don't suppose it's much use our hanging around here. I think the best thing we can do is to get back to the others. They'll be wondering what's happening. When it gets light, however, it would be a good plan if you could come down here and have a good look round. You may be able to collect some evidence—tyre marks and so on."

With that we all piled into my car again and, turning round, motored back to Latchingdon. There was not much hope of our overtaking them if they went straight back to London. But they might well have taken a longer route round, or even have stopped at some point. Or they may have been delayed by the police.

"Mr. Jenkins was flushed by a large dog," I explained to Barford as we climbed into the car, "and had to hide in the marshes."

"Yes, Sir, so I gathered. I'm afraid you must be rather wet and cold," he said, turning to Jenkins. "I suppose, Sir, you couldn't identify these persons in any way, or perhaps you weren't able to see what they were doing."

"No, Sergeant," replied Jenkins, "I'm afraid I was too far off, but they couldn't have been there for many minutes."

I don't know how long it was before I got the mud out of my eyes, it was damned painful, and in fact it still is," he said ruefully. "I suppose it was about twenty minutes in all from the time I first heard them."

"You say there were three of them, Jenkins," I asked. "I suppose you didn't see whether they picked up anyone. The three you saw were leaving, I take it?"

"Yes, Sir, they scrambled up over the sea wall and presumably all climbed into the truck."

"You didn't see how many arrived by any chance, or hear how many voices there were?"

No, Sir, I'm afraid I didn't. Unfortunately, from where I was, down in the marsh, I couldn't see very much and I was afraid I might be spotted if I stood up." At that moment we drew up at the police block. There was one van already there being interrogated.

"You stay here, Jenkins, we don't want all these people to see you looking like that. You are smelling like a sewer, too. Here, you'd better take a tot of this," I said, handing him a small flask. The rest of us got out to see what was happening.

By now it was close on four o'clock, and the van which had been stopped was loaded with winter vegetables, and looked innocent enough. In any case it was much too big to be mistaken for a jeep. As soon as the driver was out of ear-shot, we asked the corporal in charge if he had anything to report.

"No, Sergeant," he replied. "This one that's driving off is the first out."

"Well, Barford, I think we'd better go to the other picket. Don't forget to tell your people here that if anything like a jeep comes along, we don't want their suspicions aroused, but we must be able to identify them or their vehicle."

Then, turning my car in the roadway, we went off to alert the others.

"Listen," I explained as soon as we got there, "the people we are after should be here anytime. As far as we could see they were in a jeep and they have a large dog. I suppose you haven't seen anything yet?"

"Well, yessir! I think we've had your party," announced the corporal in charge, triumphantly.

"You have, have you," I muttered.

"Yes, Sir, they've been gone ten minutes. We've got their particulars. They were carrying firearms without a licence."

"Ah, I thought they were armed," interrupted Jenkins eagerly.

"Two shot guns, Sir, and they'd been out after duck and had no game licence either. They had some dozen or so of them birds in the back. We have them here," he continued, indicating with his torch a row of small corpses laid out on the grass. "And, what's more, it's the closed season, unless I'm mistaken."

"That sounds like the party," I said. "What else did you note? Did they have a large dog?"

"Yes, Sir, they had a dog. Not a very large one, Sir."

"What sort was it?" asked Jenkins with some feeling.

"Well, Sir, I don't rightly know," replied the corporal. "But it was a friendly old thing."

I glanced sideways at Barford, but it was too dark to see the expression on his face.

"How many of them were there?" I asked.

"Three, Sir."

"And you got their names and addresses?"

"Yes, Sir—certainly. I can have them up on a summons. There's been a lot of this poaching going on, but so far we've never managed to lay hands on 'em."

"Yes, I see. Well, that's your affair now, I think,

Barford. It won't do any harm to run them in for these minor offences. . . . In fact, it would be better if you did. As far as I am concerned, all I want are the details of these men, perhaps you could let me have all the particulars later. We'll check up on them at headquarters."

I remained discussing the night's events with Sergeant Barford for some time. Meanwhile, two further lorries drew up and were duly inspected, but, like the first we'd seen, they were only running vegetables up to the London market. It seemed to me that from our point of view we could call the thing off. Obviously the first thing to do was to find out from the Customs at Brightlingsea whether the *Dragonfly* had returned to harbour. If she had there would be no object in turning this lot out for another night.

"Very good then, Sergeant. We can pack up now. I think we've had a satisfactory night, and I hope you fellows are glad to have pinched that lot. I've no doubt there's a good deal of that been going on. I'm afraid with black market prices so high there's a great temptation. And I should think it's a pretty paying game."

"Well, Sir, I feel we should thank you for putting us on to this lot. The trouble in a large area like this is that it's well nigh impossible to catch them unless you have some indication of when and where they are likely to be. I was wondering, Sir, how you knew they was going to be there."

"Oh, well, Sergeant, that's our job, you know. We're the back room boys who have to study problems like this. As you know, we have been investigating this for some three months, and I only hope your prosecution is successful, but I don't want you to bring either myself or Mr. Jenkins into court. It's much better just to let them think it was pure chance."

We said good-bye to Sergeant Barford, and drove off in my car.

"Well, well, Jenkins, you and your bloodhounds!"

"I'm sorry about that, Sir, but it was the last thing I was expecting, and I must say I still think it was a large animal."

"I wish you didn't smell so much, but I suppose there is nothing you can do about it. Anyhow, we've had an interesting night's work, and a good deal to think about. I didn't like to ask you too much in front of the others, but there is a great deal I want to know. Meanwhile, with you looking like nothing on earth, I think we'd better run back to your flat first for a clean up, and then we can get to the office later on and ring up Brightlingsea. That would still leave us plenty of time to alert Sergeant Barford and take up positions again, if she's not come in yet. I must confess, Jenkins, I don't know what to make of tonight's events. What do you think about it? It seems to me that we have nothing on these blighters beyond another coincidence. When we check up on them we may get some clue, but I doubt it, and as things stand there is absolutely nothing beyond our suspicious minds to suppose that this lot are not perfectly bona fide black marketeers."

"Well, Sir, I've always been a bit sceptical about all this, but I didn't like to be discouraging. It had certain features which were rather odd, I agree; on the other hand, one does get these strange coincidences. But now, Sir, I am beginning to feel that there really may be more to it than I had thought."

"I'm interested to hear you say that, Jenkins. I am just beginning to take the opposite view. What's particularly impressed you? The dog?"

"No, Sir, not the dog. I don't altogether know. I can only say that until today it has all been hearsay, as far as I was concerned. But now I've actually seen something. It may seem to be only another coincidence, but they all add

up. Here we are, we worked out dates and times, and I'm blowed if they didn't actually turn up. Frankly, I never thought they would, but, having seen them myself, I can only say that I have a sort of feeling that those people were up to no good there."

"You say you couldn't see if any boat had come up the creek. You didn't hear it, I suppose?"

"No, Sir, I'm afraid not."

"Well, Jenkins, I'm dashed if I can see that there is any reason why these people shouldn't simply be poachers working for the London black market. And the fact that it's out of season probably means they get an extra good price for the birds. Incidentally, I wonder what happens to those duck the police pinched?"

"I know what's happened to a couple of them, Sir," replied my faithful assistant.

"You haven't . . ."

"Yes, Sir, they are in the boot. I told the corporal we needed them for examination. I thought you might like to examine one of them yourself, Sir. After all, we don't even know whether they've been shot or not. They may have been poisoned."

CHAPTER EIGHT

BACK in my office I soon realised that there were plenty of other matters to occupy my attention. Indeed I was conscious of the fact that in our small section of the Naval Intelligence Division, we had allowed ourselves to be diverted over long from some of our other and more important activities. Normally this would not have mattered, but with a continual demand for economy, our staff, along with that of the other Admiralty Divisions, had been drastically reduced, and we were covering a wide range of activities.

Much of the work which came our way was of a highly secret nature, and the methods by which our Naval Intelligence Division had built up such a remarkable reputation for prying into the activities of our enemies must remain untold. At the same time, the bulk of the work we had to do was simply checking up on reports in the press. From time to time some merchant vessel or trawler skipper would report having sighted a periscope or some suspicious object, and it was our particular section that had to try to obtain a reliable first hand account of what had been seen. Not many weeks went by without either Jenkins or myself having to travel down to one of the seaports, or fishing ports, to contact some genial skipper before he put to sea again, or before he became too deeply engaged in celebrating his arrival home. For some reason they seldom seemed to put into the Port of London, which would have been so handy, but it was always to places like South Shields, Barry Docks or Aberdeen that we had to travel.

Shortly after I arrived in the Division we had been under some pressure to interest ourselves in examining the numerous reports of flying saucers, but we had refused to be drawn into that, and had stoutly maintained that they were a job for the Air Ministry.

We were at that time principally engaged in checking up on the activities of a large number of Russian trawlers which had suddenly appeared off the Shetland Islands. The year before they had equally suddenly appeared in the Channel, and quite naturally there was much speculation as to why they should want to come all the way over to fish in our waters, while our trawlers were having to go farther and farther afield, even to the White Sea, to get good catches for us over here.

As far as we could see, they appeared to be behaving in quite an innocent way, but we wanted to make sure that, under cover of this, they weren't charting our coasts or doing anything else undesirable. At the moment Jenkins was down in the photographic interpretation section examining some photographs of them which he had managed to collect off some trawler, and I decided to go and see how he was getting on.

The Photographic Section was down in the basement, and only certain officers were allowed there. I went down the two flights of steps and descended into a regular rabbit warren of passages, much cluttered up with piping, ventilation trunking, and with bomb-proof girders overhead, and eventually came to the security barrier, where I showed my pass.

The actual office where Jenkins was working was quite a large space, but when I entered the lights were out except for a closely screened desk lamp at the far end, where my subordinate was peering through a powerful stereoscopic viewer.

I gathered from him, however, that there was nothing much of interest, and indeed I couldn't help noting that the particular points he was examining seemed to be far removed from the subject of Russian trawlers. Holiday snapshots, I thought—probably bathing belles which he had stalked unsuccessfully during his week-end jaunts down at Margate or Brighton. If only he could retain some healthy occupation for his spare time, he would, I reflected, be a very promising young officer. Apart from being both reliable and efficient at his work, he was a cheerful companion, and I liked his company. Our recent efforts down on the Essex marshes together had drawn us close to each other for a while. But off duty he seemed to be interested only in a sort of morbid blend of cabarets and race meetings, mixed with nostalgic recollections of Cannes and Monte Carlo. I really knew very little of what he did do in his spare time, but little though it was, it was enough to keep us on rather opposite tracks during our week-ends and during our leave.

I will say this, however, that he never let any of his dubious holiday activities interfere with the way he carried out his work. He was not the sort of officer who would either organise rowdy parties on board, or allow himself to become the worse for drink.

When we were called on, as we were from time to time, to help entertain the Foreign Naval Attachés, I always felt it advisable to keep an eye on my subordinate, but I can't say it was really necessary. At one cocktail party he seemed to be making rather a hit with the daughter of one of the South American Attachés. I forget which country it was, but I could hardly blame him, she was an extraordinarily attractive girl, and as Jenkins said when I accused him of philandering, "You never know, Sir, in intelligence work, which contacts are going to prove most useful."

I had no answer.

And there was the incident with the typist. I never knew what to make of that. But I met the girl leaving his office in some confusion because some under garment had become unhitched while Jenkins was dictating a letter. With my suspicious mind I at once accused him of having had a hand in the unhitching, but he dismissed the idea indignantly. Certainly she was well below his usual standard in looks and figure, and as no complaint came from the Mother Superior in charge of the typing pool, I gave Jenkins the benefit of the doubt.

As a matter of fact, I had rather forgotten about these occasions until Jenkins asked if he could get leave to go abroad for his ten days at Easter. I gathered that he wished to go to Ostend, and my boss wanted to know if I thought it a good idea. Frankly, I didn't, but it seemed to me that if he wasn't allowed to get himself in trouble in Ostend, he would probably do so just as easily at Clacton or Eastbourne or any other of our own seaside resorts. And, after all, if he had been a civilian, he wouldn't have had to get permission at all. So off he went, beaming like a Cheshire cat.

Ten days later, when he returned, he was obviously bursting to tell me all about it. I gathered he had met some girl over there, but I really didn't particularly relish the thought of having to listen to some lurid description of Jenkins' night life in Ostend. However, he was very insistent and seemed to think that this had some connection with the *Dragonfly*. I explained to him that I really felt we had wasted quite enough time over the *Dragonfly*, and there was quite enough to get on with in other directions. He looked so crestfallen over the rebuff that in the end I

half relented and agreed that if it was kept outside of our working hours, I was quite ready to listen to his story. I didn't particularly wish to encourage him, but I didn't see it could do much harm. Anyhow, in the outcome, I arranged to drive somewhere out of London, where we could go for a good walk, get some good fresh air, and discuss this at the same time.

While he had been away I had been working fairly hard to keep pace with the work of our section. A combination of travelling by night and staying up late in the office had left me feeling tired and somewhat stale. I was glad, therefore, of an opportunity to get away for the afternoon. London had become warm and sultry, and I was feeling somewhat cross and irritable.

We drove in silence, or with little more than desultory conversation, all the way down to the South coast. I wanted a glimpse of the sea to restore my spirits and, climbing up the coast road on to the top of the Downs at Beachy Head, we parked the car and stepped out briskly across the chalky turf.

I think Jenkins realised I was in a bad mood. Anyhow, he had refrained, with commendable restraint, from raising the matter of Ostend. But in the crisp and bracing air up on the hill top my spirits soon improved, and finding a secluded hollow, well sheltered by gorse bushes, we lay down in the sun.

Well? What's all this you wanted to tell me about Ostend? And where does the *Dragonfly* come into it?"

Jenkins paused, "Sir," he began, "briefly the situation is this. I have been keeping a watch on a restaurant in London called the 'Blue Angel'."

"Never heard of it."

"It's quite a respectable place, Sir," he added, somewhat apologetically. "My interest was originally directed there

after I had studied the evidence given by your wild-fowling friends."

"Your friends, not mine, I think, Jenkins. Anyhow, what did they say?"

"Well, Sir, they more or less admitted that these birds they had on board were being taken to this joint called the 'Blue Angel'. And I thought I might as well have a look at it. It's just close to Knightsbridge, and quite a fashionable and cosy sort of place."

I could just imagine Jenkins peering round and noting with favour the darker corners and recesses where he could entertain his lady friends.

"Just the sort of place," he continued, "where I should imagine the Black Market would find ready customers. Anyway, Sir, to cut a long story short, I have been going there pretty frequently in the hopes of getting some further clue."

"Any luck?" I enquired.

But Jenkins was not to be hurried.

"I went there almost every day, both for lunch and dinner, for nearly three weeks. Rather an expensive pastime," he commented, "but anyhow I gradually sorted out the regular customers. He paused. It wasn't long before I had identified Batt."

"Batt," I repeated, beginning to take an interest. "How did you manage to identify him, I didn't know you had seen him."

"As a matter of fact, Sir, I hadn't. But his face seemed vaguely familiar, and then I remembered that I had seen his photograph, or thought I had, when I was checking up on Maitland's and Batt's passports. Fortunately, they had let me borrow the duplicates which I had had photographed by our own department so that we could keep our own records. So I only had to look up in our own dossiers to

check up on him, and sure enough it was Batt all right."

I remembered seeing Jenkins down in the Photographic Section when we were studying the Russian trawlers earlier in the month, and wondered if that was what he had been doing with the heap of micro-film prints beside him.

"As far as I could tell," he continued, "he must have been connected with the establishment in some way, as the waiters always seemed to treat him as if he were the boss. After that I could, of course, concentrate on Batt's contacts, but I couldn't see quite how I could identify them." He paused again.

"I know you may laugh, Sir, but one of them who dined with him fairly frequently was a woman, and I thought I had better see if there was anything doing in that direction."

"I'm not laughing, Jenkins," I said, as seriously as I could, "but there's just one question. Was she young and attractive?"

There was another pause. Jenkins looked the other way and then turning to me he said:

"Sir, perhaps you would rather I didn't go on. I thought you might be interested. I—er—don't want to bore you . . ." His voice trailed off, and I could see that in some way I must have hurt his feelings a great deal more than I suspected.

"I'm so sorry, old chap," I added quickly, "I didn't mean you to take that seriously. As a matter of fact, I was just getting interested. Please go on."

I waited for a moment wondering what he was thinking; then he continued.

"It sounds rather stupid really, Sir, but—well . . ." he tailed off again, lost in thought.

Away below us the sea looked blue and inviting, and the white sail of a yacht working down channel made my

thoughts wander. We remained silent for some minutes. At length he continued.

"Sir, to cut the story short, this girl seems to be in touch with members of the Communist party over in Belgium."

"How did you figure that out?" I asked.

"I think, Sir," he replied, "that if we could go back to the office I could show you the evidence I have collected and which I have been piecing together. I didn't like to bring all the stuff down here. I thought—er—perhaps if I could get you interested first, I could explain to you later on how I arrived at this conclusion."

I was interested, or becoming so anyway, and a couple of hours later we were back at the Admiralty. It was a Saturday evening and apart from the duty staff, the place was shut and deserted. However, we went straight down to the room where I had seen Jenkins studying the photographs, and I waited while he sorted through the contents of a large envelope of press cuttings and prints which he had collected.

The first he selected was a press cutting out of a Belgian paper, showing a group. The central figure of which was Maurice Blanchard.

"Yes, I see he is described as a prominent member of the Communist party in Belgium," I commented. "What connection have you got with him?"

"Well, I would like you to study this figure here," he said, indicating one of the men standing at the edge of the group. Then, turning to his list of exhibits, Jenkins invited me to study a small 16mm. print which looked as if it was a still taken from a motion picture film, or else taken with a Leica camera. I examined it intently with a powerful magnifying glass.

The picture was of a man and woman walking towards

the camera. And, as far as I could tell, it was taken in a crowded street. I examined the figures intently, and agreed with Jenkins that the man was the same as the one he had indicated in the group.

"Who is the girl?" I asked.

"Her name is Marcelle Descarte."

"How did you find out that?" I asked, with growing interest. I was beginning to feel that my subordinate had either been extraordinarily lucky or very clever.

"Well, Sir, she is the girl I have been seeing dining in the 'Blue Angel'. My attention was first directed to her, not on account of her youth or beauty—although she isn't bad, as you can see from this." He handed me an enlargement of a very smart and attractive girl with fair hair, and aged about 26. She was obviously rather striking, although perhaps a bit over decorated. She had, I thought, a slightly hard expression.

"What attracted my attention to this girl," continued Jenkins, encouraged by my interest, "was not her looks, but the way he seemed to treat her. He didn't seem to treat her the way you would expect to treat a girl whom you were taking out regularly."

"I hate to think of the way you treat a girl when you take her out," I commented. But Jenkins was not to be put off a second time.

"It wasn't very difficult for me to ask the waiter if I could have my favourite table. And, as a regular, I managed to sit where I could overhear anyhow some of their conversation. It wasn't very easy, because they dropped their voices when they wanted to discuss anything private. The first clue I got was when the waiter came and announced that she was wanted on the phone. I got her name. Her surname, Descarte. She was foreign of course, I could tell that at once by her accent, but I didn't know her initials,

or whether she was a fraulein, madame, mademoiselle, or what."

He hunted for another exhibit, but couldn't find it, and continued, "I found that she had fairly regular habits. She would be in for three nights, usually Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, and then she would miss a week. After that she would come in again. It seemed to me that she must be going away somewhere. I thought perhaps she might be a courier going backwards and forwards to the Continent. I didn't want to jump to conclusions, so my next task was to consider how I could check up on this. Just as I was feeling stuck, I managed to overhear one of them refer to KLM. It was not very difficult after that for me to get hold of the KLM passenger lists, past and present. I just went round to the Victoria Air Terminus."

"Didn't they ask you why you wanted them?"

"No. I produced a press card and said that I was writing up a gossip column. There is nothing secret about them. Anyway, I soon came across the name Descarte. Madame M. Descarte, listed as a Belgian subject, and a regular traveller from Northolt to Ostend every Friday on the evening plane. The only thing that foxed me was that she never seemed to make the return journey. But it didn't take me long to find out that she returned by Sabena for some reason. She found it more convenient, I presume."

Jenkins cast a discreet glance in my direction to see if I was following, and then started again to look among his papers. He seemed a trifle nervous and I felt he was striving very hard, under cover of his usual outward calm, to impress me favourably. Perhaps after my rather discouraging attitude, and rather jocular comments, he had been more put off his stroke than I had realised. But I must say here, that although I didn't remark on it at the time, his research work and his reasoning struck me as being a remarkable

effort on his part. I can quite see, on looking back, that with all this bottled up in his head, it must have been very disappointing to receive such little encouragement from me, especially after all the work we had done on this together earlier on. Once more giving up his search he continued.

"Once I discovered that she was a regular traveller, it was not very difficult to book a seat on the same plane. Fortunately for me it was at the week-end, and all I had to do was to get the Saturday off and the way was clear."

He took out his diary. "On the 17th March we took off in the same plane, and I managed to seat myself next to her and, as you know, Sir, air travel is a very easy form of introduction; specially as we more or less recognised each other as co-diners at the 'Blue Angel'. The label on her suitcase had given me her address—The Hotel Splendide—so I didn't have to ask her too much. I thought I had better vaguely make out that I worked in the West End, without being too precise, and was merely taking a little week-end's relaxation. We had quite a cosy journey, in fact."

"I'll bet you did!"

"Well, Sir, I thought that having got as far as this, the only thing to do was to try to keep in touch."

"Yes, Jenkins, it rather depends on what you mean by the words 'in touch'."

"I promise you, Sir," he protested, "this was strictly a business deal. But to continue. I told her that I was hoping to get into the Hotel Splendide also, but wasn't certain if I had a room booked or not. Actually I had got one in the Grande, but I thought I might do better by going to the same place, where I could observe her contacts. When we touched down, we shared the same taxi, as I thought an open and friendly attitude on my part would help to dispel any suggestion that she was being followed."

Jenkins' full story was rather a remarkable one really,

and we left the Admiralty late. His first trip over to Ostend had apparently not got him very far, but during his Easter leave he had perfected his plans for checking up on her contacts. The difficulty, he explained, was that unknown men came into the hotel lounge and she simply got up and they left by car. It gave him no chance to identify anyone. He could hardly go round asking everyone who they were, and starting a lot of gossip. And although he might, if quick enough, have noted down the car number, it would look a bit odd if he dashed out after them each time she got up to go. He had tried loitering about outside for a while, but that had its limits. And what made things more difficult was that it might look a bit suspicious if he went back on some future occasion to the same hotel.

"How did you get over that?" I asked.

"Well, Sir, it wasn't altogether satisfactory, but my plan was to get hold of a street corner photographer and, with the aid of a small financial inducement, to persuade him to stand outside the hotel and photograph everyone entering and leaving."

He then opened a drawer full of small micro-film prints. "This is the result, Sir," he said, in a matter-of-fact voice. "It took me quite a long time to go through them all."

"But didn't your photographer accomplice think all this rather odd?"

"No, I don't think so. Sir. You see, I had a friend who works in the Casino there, and he arranged this for me. I explained to him that I was doing this for a friend of mine who suspected his wife of being unfaithful to him, and he thought a photograph or two might be rather valuable. In fact, I was surprised how cheap it was. I had to hire him for a whole day, but I gather the chief difficulty was to prevent the Commissionaire from moving him off."

I picked up some of the micro-film prints. It was an

extraordinarily ingenious idea, I thought, getting a street corner photographer to take a complete photographic record. I wondered if they were frequently employed by private detective agencies.

"These are only the discards," commented Jenkins, as I picked up one of two rather attractive looking girls setting out in their sun suits.

"Your hotel seems to have been quite a gay place, but I still don't see how even with these snapshots you managed to identify Madame Descarte's companion."

"There was nothing subtle about that, Sir," replied Jenkins. "I went back to my friend in the Casino as soon as the photographer let me have the prints—Ah? Here it is," he said, unearthing the enlargement he had been looking for. "You see, I took this along to Alphonse and asked if by any chance this man was known locally. Of course, he only thought I was still trying to help my friend get a divorce, so I don't think he was unduly curious."

"Well," I asked, "did he recognise the man?"

"Yes, Sir, that is where I was lucky. Otherwise it might have taken rather longer. But apparently he is quite a well known local Communist in Ostend. It was Alphonse who produced that newspaper cutting."

"Alphonse is, I suppose, your friend at the Casino."

"Yes, Sir, I have known him for many years. I don't know what his real name is, but he was quite a friend of the family when I was a boy and we used to travel round a bit. We first met him at Le Touquet I think. He is the sort of person who seems to know more or less everybody, and I felt sure that he would be able to help, but if I had been unlucky I was going to follow it up through one of the private detective agencies over in Belgium."

"Well, Jenkins, I must say you have produced a very

plausible story. I am just wondering what you suggest is the next step." I thought for a moment before continuing. "I mean I am just wondering what the reaction will be when I go along and ask the skipper to explain to the Director of the Naval Intelligence Division of the Naval Staff, that this brilliant young officer, Lieutenant Jenkins, Royal Navy, has been, well, 'in touch' I think was the precise expression if I remember aright, with this—er—very striking female, and now she turns out to be a spy in black. . . . Well, I'm just sort of wondering, Jenkins, that's all."

He laughed. "You certainly seem to have portrayed rather a difficult situation, Sir, but I wasn't really suggesting that we should go along to the Director or to Captain Thoroughgood for that matter. I can quite see that it's not a particularly easy story to explain at present. What I wanted to do, Sir, was to try to get you interested again. It's quite possible that the whole thing may be a completely false trail, but it does seem to me that there may well be more in it."

"What do you suggest then?"

"Well, Sir, I have always felt that when one looks back over all the facts we have available on this, we have never done as much as we might with your friends who first reported the *Pultava*."

"Ah, the reliable witnesses."

"Yes, Sir. I can't help feeling that if we could get hold of them again they might be able to give us some further clue. There were two of them, weren't there, Sir?"

"Yes, Jenkins."

"Were they brothers?"

"No, no, they are not brothers . . ."

"I was just wondering, Sir," continued my assistant, "if we couldn't perhaps take them a bit into our confidence."

It occurred to me that they seem to know Maitland and Batt. Perhaps if they still have their yacht we could go for a cruise and try to find out a bit more about the *Dragonfly* by direct contact."

Somehow the thought of Jenkins mixing with the girls had always rather appalled me. I don't know why. Partly because, with his peculiar outlook on women in general, I didn't particularly relish the thought of having him checking up on my holiday activities. Nor for that matter was it particularly desirable for him to find out that the girls had been smuggling. Not, I suppose, that that really mattered a great deal.

I picked up the enlargement of Marcelle and compared her in my mind with Juliet and Susan. Somehow I couldn't quite imagine Jenkins fitting in very well on board the *Fame*. Then I thought of the story Jenkins had been telling me and of all the threads of evidence he had managed to string together. As I listened to him I realised that he had succeeded, anyhow to a small extent, in re-awakening my interest in the activities of the *Dragonfly*. I tried to balance the matter up in my mind. If only Jenkins had been a bit more normal in his spare time activities, and with not quite such a cynical outlook on women. That would make it easy. But perhaps I misjudged him. Perhaps he was normal. Perhaps I was the one who was abnormal.

"You are suggesting that we brew up a week-end cruise then?"

"Yes, Sir."

"All right, Jenkins, I'll see what I can do. Have you done much of this sort of thing?"

"Not a great deal, Sir," he admitted. "But I suppose I've been out in quite a number of yachts in one way and another."

I seemed to remember some time back having seen a

picture in the *Tatler*. It was a photograph of a group of very fashionable looking people taken during Cowes week, and included Jenkins. As far as I could recollect, it had been taken on the deck of a rather smart looking motor yacht called the *Blue Vanity*. Jenkins with a cocktail shaker in his hand was obviously the centre of an admiring group. And there had been other occasions which left me in little doubt of my assistant's attributes as a playboy of no mean scope. Oh, well, I thought, we can but have a try. It would be interesting to see what the girls would make of him.

Looking on the brighter side, the thought of seeing Jenkins when he first set foot in *Fame*, and the look on his face as it dawned on him that she was not the large and luxurious sort of yacht he probably had in mind, was not without humour. There was no reason to give the show away. I was in any case going down to the boat the following evening, and could easily confirm the arrangements over the phone, and Jenkins could come down for the week-end. Meanwhile, I was still doubtful as to the advisability of telling the girls the whole story; after all, whatever we may have thought about it, this was certainly a top secret matter. Besides which the girls were young, and then perhaps Platt would get to hear of it, and heaven knows what contacts he still maintained with the Black Market. Nor did I particularly wish to have Jenkins probing too closely and finding out about the smuggling. We could see how matters progressed. Meanwhile, as far as the girls were concerned, this would be just a casual friendly visit. They could think I was trying to introduce a sailing companion.

CHAPTER NINE

IT WAS a warm, drowsy spring afternoon. The sun's reflection shimmered on the calm surface of the sea as I sat on the bench down by the waterfront enjoying the scene before me. It was the first really warm day we had had, and the still hazy atmosphere had a distinct touch of summer that was very pleasing.

All along the waterfront, the way I had just come, there were the unmistakable signs of a yachting centre emerging from its winter quarters. Here and there, out in the creek, sails hoisted to dry or stretch hung limply in the still air. Every now and then the rattle of some distant block, echoing across the water, called attention to some further activity afloat. While along the shore the smell of paint and varnish indicated that full advantage was being taken of the fine weather. Opposite Wyatt's boat shed, a group of people stood watching a yacht being slowly, but carefully, warped down the slip-way into the water, looking all shiny and glistening in its new paint, while the proud but distracted owner bustled round on deck lowering fenders over the side. Soon the cry of "mind my paint" would be added to the other sounds of the creek.

A brightly coloured butterfly settled momentarily on the back of the bench where I sat waiting. It spread its wings in the afternoon sun, and then suddenly flitted off on its way again along the grassy verge in quest of spring flowers.

I looked across the creek, where, amidst all the other masts, I could see *Fame* lying at her moorings. Whenever we had the chance we had been working hard on her for the last month, getting ready for the coming season. We

were lucky in that between the three of us we had the time to do most of the work on her ourselves. Indeed, it was only in this way that Juliet and Susan could afford to keep her going. Much of the work was very congenial, and we had toiled happily together at the week-ends, scraping, sandpapering, and varnishing, or stitching away at the sails where the threads or the seams had become chafed and looked in need of repair. At other times it was not so pleasant. This year we had taken up the flooring and thoroughly cleaned out all the bilges—a cold and dirty job. And then there had been the task of scraping and painting the bottom. For this we'd had to warp the *Fame* out of her mud berth, on a wet and windy evening when the tides were at their highest, and move her round to the hard, where she could dry out. It was, for some reason, Susan's task to get right under the bilges and scrub the more difficult bits. And then came the anti-fouling.

That was really the worst of the tasks, and when it was over and the *Fame* really afloat once again after her long rest, we sat around in the saloon and brewed ourselves a steaming hot jug of coffee and gossiped.

We discussed what we planned to do when I retired, and whether it would be possible to make a long cruise into the Mediterranean. The girls were very keen to do this. Susan in particular was very set on trying the Greek Islands, but it seemed rather far off to me. Besides which I was doubtful as to how safe one would be from bandits or Communist guerilla forces. We had then turned to discussing Jenkins and his forthcoming visit. I had endeavoured to give the girls some impression of this young officer whom I was asking down, but it was not very easy to be frank on all matters. However, I was hopeful that Jenkins would regard this visit strictly as business. The girls were naturally interested, but whether they welcomed the pros-

pect of his coming was another matter. If they did it was probably more in the hopes of finding out a bit about myself, than through any desire to enlarge their limited circle of friends. Indeed, they seemed more preoccupied in discussing all the many tasks that needed doing in preparation for our much anticipated summer cruise.

Juliet was busy with all sorts of ideas for improving the commissariat, while Susan was wondering what charts she would have to order and where on earth they could be stowed. We hoped to go farther down channel than we had done so far, possibly into the Bay of Biscay. And then there was the question of sails. For the most part *Fame's* canvas was more suited to stormier waters. If we were going South, something in the nature of a large jib topsail or a 'Genoa' jib seemed indicated. Something that would keep the ship ghosting along in light airs. Fired by this we had been round to all the yards nearby in the hopes of picking up something secondhand. At length, over in Brightlingsea, our search had been rewarded, and for a surprisingly small sum we had returned with just what we wanted, but it entailed quite a number of small jobs in the way of halliards, down hauls, sheets, and so on, which had kept us busy. Most of the work aloft had been done by Susan, who was the lightest of the party, and the easiest to hoist. I could, indeed, see her from where I was, seated astride the cross trees, and working on something or other. She was an extraordinarily active girl, even for a youngster. I suppose it was her light weight that helped, but she could shin up the mast like a monkey. I remembered on one occasion during our last cruise, some rope's end or other had got jambed in one of the blocks aloft when we were trying to shorten sail, and before I could look round, Susan had scrambled up and cleared it. It was certainly a great asset to have someone like that on board.

As I sat there waiting for Jenkins, my mind wandered back to the day when I had first come down to the hard here with the two girls; and how grudgingly I had decided to return just for a short cruise to please their father. And how it had really opened up a completely new life for me. Just when I was beginning to feel 'passed over' and more than usually despondent, I had been given a new interest and was beginning to feel younger every day.

As I sat there waiting for him to arrive, I found that I was beginning to have misgivings. A yacht was a very small place, and I wondered if Jenkins fully realised what he was coming to. And whether he appreciated that this was 'small boat cruising', not 'Cowes week', nor for that matter was it 'that sort of yachting', to which I had heard him referring in a knowing kind of way one day in the office. We could always dump him, I reflected, if he turned out to be a misfit.

At that moment I heard a car coming down the road, and looked round. A sports car of ancient vintage with a powerful sounding exhaust approached and drew to a standstill opposite the 'Victory'. Instinctively I realised that the figure heavily disguised in a flying helmet and goggles must be Jenkins. He hadn't seen me sitting on the seat and was looking round to make sure he had come to the right place. His car, by its appearance, must have been a relic of his sub-lieutenant days. It appeared to have no windscreen or doors, and the bonnet was held down by a large leather strap, and on either side, past the driver, ran two enormous copper exhaust pipes. These protruded well to the rear, and at the ends were inclined slightly upwards and outwards, so that the rich music of the exhaust could be fully appreciated by those who did not have the good fortune to possess such a machine.

As I rose from my bench and went over towards the car,

my intuition was confirmed, the flying helmet and goggles were removed and there sat Jenkins.

"I never realised you owned a thing like this, Jenkins," I said by way of greeting.

Oh, I've had it for years, Sir," he replied. "But it's getting a bit shaky now, I'm afraid. I had to take the wind-screen off last summer, but it's just as good without."

"More streamlined in fact, eh?"

"Yes, it is a bit, but I'm thinking of selling it. I had an offer from an undertaker."

"An undertaker?" I exclaimed. "What, Faster Funerals Limited?"

"No, Sir, I think he wanted the tyres, but it's worth more than that, so I held on."

As I was looking over the machine curiously, I hadn't noticed Jenkins climb out, but when I looked round there he was standing in a smart pair of white flannels, a blue double-breasted reefers, and a yachting cap complete with white cover.

"I almost forgot it was the first of May," he said somewhat coyly as he saw me looking at his head dress.

"Well, this is splendid, Jenkins, white cap cover and all. I'm afraid you're much smarter than we are, but never mind. We'll use you if we want to impress the Customs. And now we had better get on board. I'll get Platt to look after your car as soon as he arrives. He should be here, but how about your luggage?"

I observed that he had arrived with two large suitcases, but just as I was about to comment, Platt arrived.

"This is Lieutenant Jenkins," I said, introducing him. "How about his car? Do you think you can drive it up to the house?"

"Why yes, Sir," replied the indefatigable Platt, looking with admiration at the machine. That's a Vortex, you

don't see many of them about these days, Sir. I used to drive one when I was captain's steward in the *'ighflyer*. They don't make cars like them nowadays." He walked round, looking affectionately at the Vortex, rather like a judge at a pony show.

"I think I had better explain about the starting arrangements," said Jenkins, as Platt climbed in over the exhaust manifold. "You have to wedge up the accelerator and start her in gear by pushing."

We went round to the back and started to shove. In a moment there was a shattering explosion, a blinding tongue of flame seemed to flash by my face, and the car sprang forward. By the time Platt had brought her under control she was already on the beach.

"She doesn't do that as a rule," commented Jenkins apologetically, looking at a large black patch of soot on his otherwise spotless trousers. "That's why I usually wedge up the accelerator. However, he'll be all right now he's started."

After Platt had driven courageously up the road and we had watched him out of sight, Jenkins called my attention to the figure of a motor cyclist some distance up the road. He was about a hundred yards off, and appeared to be examining the engine or the back wheel.

"I don't like to sound too suspicious, Sir," commented Jenkins, "but that fellow has followed me down here."

"Followed you?" I repeated vacantly. "But what on earth for?"

"That's what I'd like to know, Sir. Of course it may be pure chance, but I happened to notice him soon after I left the Admiralty and there the blighter is. He's kept more or less a couple of hundred yards behind me all the way. I can't imagine exactly how or why anyone should contrive to pick up my trail like this. After all, there must be

hundreds of people leaving the Admiralty. Why pick on me?"

"One of your Ostend acquaintances, maybe."

"Even so, Sir, I can't quite see how they managed to pick up my trail so easily."

"Well, there is your car, of course. It's not exactly a hum-drum model. Once they realised it was yours, I should imagine the rest would be fairly easy. But are you sure about all this, because I don't particularly want to start a scare. If he starts following Platt about the place," I added, "he'll probably get more than he bargains for. Meanwhile we had better get on board."

As I was paddling carefully off with Jenkins and the two suitcases, he suddenly said, "That's a nice looking yacht getting under way."

I turned and looked over my shoulder. "Yes, that's the *Dragonfly*."

We stopped and watched from a distance. There seemed to be three of them on board as usual. Maitland, Batt and the paid hand presumably. She had slipped her mooring and was threading her way down harbour between the many other smaller craft. Jenkins gazed after her without comment, and I continued rowing. Presently we drew alongside *Fame*.

"Good heavens," muttered Jenkins half aloud. "Is this the ship?"

"Why the 'good heavens'?" I enquired.

"Oh, nothing, Sir, nothing really. Somehow or other I had rather pictured her as looking a bit different."

"Ahoy there?" I called, as we drew near.

Susan hailed a greeting from aloft, while Juliet emerged on deck.

"Who on earth are these two?" muttered Jenkins in a low voice.

“‘Reliable Witnesses’ Jenkins!”

He looked puzzled.

“Reliable witness,” I repeated. “Just as reliable as—er—Marcelle.”

“But, good Lord, Sir. It never occurred to me that you . . .” He brightened perceptibly. “I mean—I’m glad to find that you are so well fixed up.”

“What do you mean, ‘fixed up’?”

“Well, Sir, if I were in your position I should feel I’d done rather well to pick up a couple of young and attractive . . .”

“Damn you, Jenkins!” I spluttered, irritated by the look of admiration on his face. “I haven’t just picked them up as you seem to think. I’ve known them ever since they were children. They are Admiral Mathews’ daughters.”

Jenkins was just about to reply when we bumped alongside.

“Hello!” said Juliet, reaching down for the painter. “I’m so glad you were able to come. Uncle David has been telling us all about you.” I could see by the look on her face that she was viewing his yachting cap and white trousers with some concern. Even Jenkins was beginning to realise that he contrasted somewhat oddly with the shirts and shorts worn by the girls.

He stood up to shake Juliet by the hand, but the heavily loaded dinghy wobbled precariously and he sat down again looking rather sheepish. Very carefully we passed the suitcases up, and then scrambled on board.

“This is splendid,” said Juliet, shaking his hand. “Welcome on board.”

Meanwhile Susan had slid down from aloft looking more than slightly dishevelled, and well spattered with Stockholm tar. “I hope you like the ship,” she said.

The two girls stood looking him up and down as if he

were some sort of curiosity that had come up in the trawl. I felt rather sorry for him really, and could see that he was a bit put out.

"What's the Club?" asked Susan, looking up at his cap badge with interest.

"Oh, that's nothing much. It's just a sailing club I used to belong to over in France."

"Well, anyhow, let's get your things stowed away," said Juliet, "and then we can send those great boxes of yours ashore."

Susan and I followed down into the saloon, where we celebrated Jenkins' arrival by having tea.

After this was over the task of settling Jenkins in began. I'd suffered from this sort of thing before, and sat back to watch.

"You'd better take off those white trousers of yours," said Juliet, taking charge of her department. "They'll only get spoilt, and your coat too, for that matter. We hang our smart things up in this cupboard. If you pass them over, I'll hang them up for you."

"Do I have to undress here?" bleated Jenkins, rather pathetically.

"Well, you can go up on deck if you prefer," she replied casually, "but you'll have to come down again. I'm afraid we don't run to a changing room or anything like that. What else have you got to wear?" she said, running through his clothes. "You don't seem to have got much sea-going stuff."

"Oh, I can wear these things," he replied, "it doesn't matter if they get dirty."

"Nonsense," said Juliet. "Uncle David will have to lend you his spare denims. Here you are, and you'd better go up on deck if you want to."

He ascended obediently, while the two girls rapidly

stowed his clothes. Poor Jenkins, he hadn't quite bargained for this.

"What marvellous pyjamas," said Susan presently, handing over something that looked black and rather silky.

"Don't you people be so scornful," I replied, "silk pyjamas are damned good things to wear sailing. They stop your skin itching."

"Yes, Uncle David, but not black surely."

"Black is a very good colour," I said, loyally supporting my friend in his absence. "They don't need washing—saves water. I should have thought that your practical minds would approve of that."

"Why don't you use them?" asked Juliet.

"Why?" I repeated. "Well, because wool doesn't make my skin itch. But a great many people I know can't bear anything with wool next to their skin. It gets damp and apparently itches like blazes, but I'm lucky and it doesn't seem to worry me."

Stiff shirts, dinner jacket, evening shoes, were all produced.

"No good unpacking these," said Juliet scornfully, "they might as well go ashore again."

"Gosh! This feels pretty solid," said Susan, unwrapping a paper parcel. "A revolver."

"What an extraordinary fellow," muttered Juliet. "I hope he's not going to try and intimidate us, or anything like that. Does your friend usually go about armed like this, Uncle David?"

"Not that I know of," I replied, feeling somewhat surprised myself. "But you'd better put it away before he comes down, and not say anything about it. I should think he's feeling a bit miserable as it is."

"How about all these cap covers, then?" asked Susan.

"Let him have two," said Juliet firmly.

Presently Jenkins came back into the saloon looking more suitably clad, and the two of us set about putting his suitcases ashore. There was no sign of anyone hanging about or loitering suspiciously, and we returned on board. By that time it was too late to get under way, and in any case the tide was falling rapidly, so we decided to remain where we were till the morning. When we got on board, Juliet had a steaming cup of Nescafé ready for us to drink, while she explained the arrangements for the night.

"You don't mean to say that you sleep on board here when you are in harbour," commented Jenkins.

That was the last straw as far as the girls were concerned.

"Good heavens, why not?" they echoed in a chorus of indignation. "We'd much rather be here than ashore."

"But where do I sleep then?" asked Jenkins, looking round.

"Not in here," I said grimly.

"We are putting you in the fore peak," said Juliet with a firmness that seemed final.

"Where do you sleep then?" he said, looking rather enviously in my direction.

"In here," I replied, "where I'm sitting."

He got up and, stooping low, went forward to inspect his quarters. I winked at Juliet, and a faint smile flickered across her face. Presently Jenkins returned to the light of the saloon, but straightening up too soon, he caught his head a fearful crack and almost stunned himself.

"Blast it," he said ruefully, rubbing the top of his scalp. "But do you really expect me to sleep in there?"

"Why not?" we all replied.

"Well—I suppose it's all right, but I've never had to sleep in the cable locker before. I don't quite see," he added, looking significantly at me, "what's wrong with that bunk next to yours."

"Nothing, but I expect Juliet thought you would prefer the privacy of the focsle. It will save having to go up on deck every time you want to change or put on those black silk pyjamas of yours. Or are they chiffon?"

He went slightly pink. "I must say you treat your visitors rough when they first arrive. I'm afraid I wasn't expecting anything like this."

"I suppose in the *Blue Vanity* you had a suite to yourself with an onyx bathroom attached and a steward to call you in the morning."

"What exactly were you expecting?" asked Susan gently, evidently beginning to feel a bit sorry for Jenkins.

"To be honest, I didn't realise it would be quite so small as this, but I must say it's very cosy down here, and now I've seen what it's like, I'm beginning to look forward to it. I hope I won't bump my head too often, though."

"We were rather afraid you might be expecting something a bit grander," put in Susan. "I think it's a shame to make you sleep in there. You've been very good natured about it."

"All right then," said Juliet. "We'll put him abaft Uncle David, and if he starts dreaming or sleep walking or anything like that, Uncle David will have to take care of him."

"What do we call you?" enquired Susan. "We can't go on saying Mr. Jenkins all the time. It sounds terribly stiff and formal."

He looked rather awkwardly in my direction. "I'm usually called Puffin."

"Good Lord, do they call you that in the office?" I asked.

"No, Sir, not as a rule."

"Oh, well, never mind."

So Puffin it was. Why Puffin, I never found out, but to

my surprise he soon settled in and indeed we had a most convivial evening. The girls were never very shy on board in any case, and by the time they had produced a bottle of schnapps and then some other mixture, probably left over from the days when they had to square the Customs, Jenkins was in rattling good form. Rather as I expected, they soon got to asking him all about myself. What was I like at the Admiralty—was I as stern as I was on board? Did I have a whole bevy of beautiful stenographers, and so on. The atmosphere quickly thawed and we all thoroughly enjoyed Jenkins' good company. This was a new Jenkins to me, quite different from what I expected, and instead of feeling that his presence on board was going to spoil an otherwise good week-end, I turned in that night with the pleasant anticipation that he was going to be a welcome addition to the crew.

At first I feared we were going to be unlucky with the wind. Up for an early start we got everything ready, but the main sail hung limply in the still morning air. A few wisps of low cloud remained suspended, almost motionless in an otherwise cloudless sky, and it gave all the appearance that it was going to be a really hot day. We disposed of our breakfast and then waited patiently. Presently, at Susan's suggestion, we slipped our moorings and allowed the ebb to carry us out, otherwise we would have missed the tide altogether. It was not a particularly easy task, as the anchorage was crowded, and there was every possibility of drifting down on to some other boat with disastrous consequences to their paint work, or with the even worse prospect of becoming embroiled with someone's bowsprit and then being unable to disengage.

However, apparently the girls were accustomed to this manœuvre, and preferred it to using the engine and, choosing just the right moment before the ebb became too strong, we slowly drifted away from our moorings. Only once did a bump seem likely and we stood by with fenders, but we had the dinghy ready alongside and in a moment Susan had dropped down into it and had towed us to one side. A slight push with a boat hook and we were clear. On we drifted in silence for nearly two miles and we were just considering whether to anchor in case we got into shallow water, when we started to pick up the faintest breeze coming in from seaward. At first scarcely enough to stir the sails, but gradually it freshened until in the calm waters we were slipping along at about four knots.

It was one of the most enjoyable sails I can recall. We had decided to make up the coast for the Orwell, and if possibly get as far as Pinmill, and I must say my thoughts were far removed from any of the sinister doubts which Jenkins had been sowing in my mind since his return from Ostend. We lay on deck sunning ourselves, blissfully enjoying the lazy roll of the ship. All through the forenoon *Fame* ghosted along leaving little more than a trail of bubbles on either side to mark her passage through the water. But gradually during the day the breeze freshened, and before long we were making good progress up the coast. Jenkins, who had only seen Clacton and Frinton from the landward side, studied them carefully through the binoculars, and slightly appalled the girls by his nostalgic eulogies of the sea front with the bathing huts. I thought at one moment he was about to suggest anchoring, but with a freshening onshore breeze, I think his sense of seamanship overcame his predatory instincts.

By tea time we had entered the harbour of Harwich and, passing Felixstowe on the one hand and the Boys'

Training Establishment of Shotley on the other, we carried our fair breeze right up to our anchorage. I have always liked Pinmill. It is one of those quiet places where the world is at peace with itself. The reflection of the few buildings nestling by the water edge, and the wooded slopes, give it a secluded atmosphere which is all too rare in most of our rivers and creeks. Drifting slowly in on the dying breeze we came to anchor just about dusk. We all felt sleepy and ready to turn in, but none the less contrived to have another cheerful evening.

I forget what it was that awoke me in the early hours of the morning, but presently I became aware that Jenkins was not in his bunk. After several minutes I decided to go up and see if he was about. As soon as I emerged into the cockpit, I observed him up forward with his head and shoulders poking out of the fore hatch. I watched him for a moment, and noticed that with the aid of binoculars he was making a careful examination of the village. Once or twice he lowered the binoculars and rubbed his eyes, and I got the impression that he had been doing this for some time. Then seeing me, he came aft to where I was sitting, a somewhat incongruous sight with a heavy duffle coat on over his black silk pyjamas.

"You seem to be up early," I said in a whisper so as not to wake the others.

"Yes, Sir, I was just taking a look round when I saw our friend on the motor bike arrive. I wish you had been up in time to see him. I'm afraid he's gone again now. I was just having a look to see if he is still about, but I can't see him."

I was beginning to fear that 'our Puffin' was obsessed

with some kind of persecution mania. I had vaguely heard of this ailment before, but had never met it at first hand.

"Are you sure it was the same fellow? I mean to say, there are quite a number of innocent motor cyclists about at this time of year."

"I couldn't be sure, Sir, but he was certainly wearing the same sort of helmet."

"Aren't they a stock issue?"

"Maybe, Sir, but I thought it was worth having a look around."

"How long have you been up?"

"Oh, not very long, Sir," he replied. "About half an hour or so."

"Goodness, you must be a bit cold in that rig. Come on, let's get below and rouse the others."

It was obvious that we were in for another fine day, and there seemed no point in hogging it in one's bunk. Even though there was virtually no wind, there were plenty of things we could do in the meantime.

As we discussed the various possibilities, it was quite obvious that Puffin had made a favourable impression on the girls in spite of his cap covers and white trousers, and in the end it was agreed that I should be put ashore as I wanted to take some exercise, and that the others could take the 'outboard' and explore up stream. We could get under way later in the afternoon and if necessary make a night passage back.

After I had been put ashore by Susan at the ferry landing I waited to watch the others setting off. There was some delay while they appeared to be waiting for Jenkins, but presently he emerged and they climbed down into the boat. The hum of the engine warned me that they were off and soon the little dinghy was speeding on its way up stream, sending out a ripple on either side across the still waters.

I watched them till they were out of sight round a bend in the river, and then I turned and walked briskly through the little village in a southerly direction. It was fresh and bracing in the early morning air, and the dew was on the grass. For a mile or so the road took me more or less away from the river, after which it joined, or rather crossed, a quiet looking country lane. Lured by the peaceful prospect of this little side road, I turned down it and must have walked for some three or four miles, scarcely meeting a soul. Somewhere away to the right I could hear the church bells ringing, and pictured to myself the scene at the little village church, with all its local history of weddings, christenings and funerals. Soon the bells stopped and I walked on enjoying the country scene.

Presently I noticed that the road I was following was leading me towards a small settlement. When I came to it it looked almost uninhabited. There was a cluster of elms and a small church which looked very old. Nearby there were some tumbledown buildings that looked like a derelict farmstead, and perhaps one or two small cottages; but I presumed that the inhabitants, if any, were probably either turned in and enjoying a good Sunday rest, or else they were in church.

I passed through this attractive little corner of old England, and about half a mile beyond, a wide pathway joined the road. As I came up to it I saw that it led down to the river. I had been walking for some hours and this seemed a good place for a halt. The path, which was little more than fifty yards long, ended at a small creek, alongside of which was an old wooden jetty in an advanced state of disrepair. It was, I imagined, the sort of place where Thames barges used to come to load hay or other farm produce, but it had been out of use for some time by the look of it.

A lark was singing lustily overhead, and I sat there for some time throwing pebbles into the water below and thinking dreamily that it would be rather a good place in which to lay up a boat. Presently I became aware that I was no longer alone. At the far end, seated in much the same position as myself, were two men.

I think the reason that first made me feel uneasy was that I hadn't heard them arrive. They might have been there some time for all I knew, but there was something rather eerie about the way they had crept up behind me so silently. This was ridiculous, I thought. I must be becoming infected by Jenkins. After all, here we were on a perfectly peaceful Sunday morning, miles from anywhere. Then my eye caught sight of the motor bike. I didn't like the position any longer. The solitude of the countryside took on a different meaning, and for the first time I realised how deserted the place was. Even the larks seemed suddenly to have ceased singing. I decided it was high time I made for home. I got up quietly and I slipped up the path to join the road. As I reached the top, I glanced back over my shoulder and noticed that the two men had risen and were moving towards their machine. Perhaps it was some sort of premonition, but there was something about those two figures down on the old disused jetty walking towards their motor cycle that I didn't like.

As soon as I got to the road I turned back along the way I had come, and quickened my steps hoping that I might fall in with some friendly soul, but there was no one in sight. Perhaps they would turn the other way, I thought, and my fears would be set at rest. I was beginning to wish very much that I hadn't got quite so far to go, and that I hadn't chosen such an apparently isolated road. There was a slight bend just ahead, and as I reached it I looked back over my shoulder again. The two men had emerged on to

the road, and to my dismay I noticed they had turned in my direction. They were wheeling the motor cycle between them. I quickened my pace, but I didn't like to run. In any case, with that machine they could easily overtake me if they wished.

I had never been followed before but there is something sinister and unpleasant about it that gave me a most horrible feeling.

As I turned along the deserted lane I cast about desperately for some cunning means of throwing them off. My mind flashed through all the gangster films I could recall, but they all seemed to deal with the crowded cities rather than the deserted countryside. Jumping into the underground just as the doors closed, or getting into a bus and then dropping off again, looked all very well on the screen, but here there seemed to be nothing handy. The little settlement, however, was not far ahead and I hurried along hoping to meet someone and have a gossip, but as I approached the place seemed quite deserted. Behind me still followed the two men wheeling their bike. The fact that they were wheeling it seemed to heighten my suspicions. Surely, I thought, it would be more normal to ride it.

As I came up to the settlement my eye caught sight of the little church in its clump of trees, and the thought suddenly struck me that here was the sanctuary I sought. Then I realised that the service would still be on. That accounted for the deserted appearance of the place. I hurried on and turned in at the little wicket gate with a feeling of relief. Walking up the little pathway to the church door, I could see my companions still faithfully wheeling their motor bike. I went up to the porch of the old church, but there was no sound of the service. They were probably in the middle of the sermon, I thought.

Quietly lifting the latch so as not to make any noise, I gently pushed the great heavy oak door. It creaked fearfully, and I slipped inside, to find the church completely empty.

I can't describe my feelings of disappointment. An unreasoning fear seemed to possess me. All the worst and most sinister forebodings that Jenkins had tried to conjure up seemed to be concentrated in these two figures remorselessly coming up the road. I thought longingly of the revolver hidden in Jenkins' baggage, and wished I had him with me. There was something about his cheerful and casual approach to all this that would have made his presence particularly welcome just then. However, there was nothing much to be done about it. The door creaked ominously as I closed it, and I looked around me. The church smelled damp and unused, and I went over to the notice board and started to look at the notices. The church was still in use, but as far as I could see they were dependent on the vicar from a neighbouring parish and only held services here every alternate Sunday. This Sunday they were down for Evensong. I wondered how long I would have to remain in here before it was safe to emerge, and whether I could not devise some other way back to Pinmill and avoid the solitary lane along which I had come.

The church was obviously very old, and under other circumstances no doubt I would have found it of great interest. A list of vicars dating back to about 1450 gave some indication of its history, and further along was a plan of the original church prepared by the Suffolk Archaeological Society. It seemed that there had been a church on this site in the time of the Danish landings. They probably came up the Orwell and burnt it.

The interior of the church was of a simple and attractive style, but the trees growing so close made it rather dim, in contrast with the bright sunny day outside. I wandered

about studying the various memorial tablets round the walls. I wondered how long I would have to hang about waiting, and whether the motor cyclists would try to conceal themselves so that they could watch me emerge. I tried the vestry door thinking perhaps I could slip out by the back and get away unseen across the fields but, as I feared, it was locked.

I was just in the act of picking up a prayer book, when I was brought sharply to my senses by the creak of the door opening. It sounded loud and ominous, and echoed round the stone walls. I caught my breath as the door opened slowly. For a brief moment I thought that it might have been swung open by the wind and that I had failed to latch it properly. But then a head peered round, followed by first one of the men and then the other.

I tried not to show any outward symptoms of panic, but I could feel my heart pounding against my ribs. For a few moments I stood where I was pretending to be reading the prayer book that was in my hand, while I watched out of the corner of my eye. They looked a rather ordinary couple. Fairly powerfully built I thought, but I was more interested in their movements.

They were obviously trying to pass themselves off as innocent sightseers, and although they were talking in whispers, they were obviously pretending to discuss the little history of the church which had first engaged my attention.

I noticed, however, that they were gradually edging round the side of the church in my direction, and so I put down the prayer book and casually continued my way round the opposite side. As I got nearer the door, the thought suddenly struck me that if I could lock them in it might be hours before they could get out. The door had a great big key, but unfortunately it was on the inside.

However, by this time they were on the far side, and by edging my way gradually nearer, I contrived to remove the key under the pretext of studying the structure of the door. I did, in fact, study it, and ran my hand up and down the planking. It was massive and heavily studded. As soon as I had the key, I opened the door as carefully as I could, it creaked horribly, but I was out. The last I saw of the two men they were looking in my direction. A moment later I had the key in the lock. For a nasty moment I thought I was going to be unable to turn it, indeed it required considerable strength, but I managed it. With a loud 'clonk' I had them locked in.

Clearly this was no time to loiter about or start whispering through the key-hole, and I started off quickly down the path. When I got down to the road there was still no one in sight, and I contemplated letting the air out of their tyres, but it seemed to me that the best thing to do was to get away quickly, and I broke into a steady double. I must have run for a nearly a mile before I eased down to a walk. I stopped to listen in case I could hear the motor bike coming, but there was no sign of any pursuit. Then I continued on my way, half running and half walking, till I found myself approaching Pinmill again and saw a friendly looking group of children ahead. By this time I was hot and out of breath and sweating profusely, so I reduced to a leisurely stroll.

When I came to the cross roads, it was evident that the church service was over. Quite a number of people were walking home or standing round in the street gossiping. What a relief to get back among these good people again. As I walked down past the attractive little cottages with their inhabitants standing on their doorsteps, I felt my confidence returning and began to wonder if perhaps I hadn't done something rather stupid. I reached the ferry landing

where I sat down and thought over all the details of what had happened. I tried to recall everything from the time I first noticed their motor bike till the moment they entered the church pretending to be innocent sightseers. It would be a bit awkward, I thought, if they really had been 'innocent sightseers'. This perverse possibility suddenly loomed large in my mind. It was, of course, quite possible, indeed the more I thought of their movements, the more innocent they suddenly seemed. After all, they had really done nothing. They hadn't even tried to prevent me getting out of the church. For a moment the thought suddenly occurred to me that they might starve to death. I imagined myself reading in the papers of "Grim Discovery in Village Church", but then I recalled that there was to be an evening service later in the day, and I breathed a sigh of relief. In any case they could always toll the bell. I tried to recall what exactly had given me such a fright in the first place. To start with, of course, I had been unnerved by Jenkins. Soon, if I didn't take care, I should be seeing a Communist spy behind every bush. But I think it was the way they seemed to wheel their bike everywhere that made me feel uneasy. If they hadn't been following me surely they would have cranked the thing up. But still I would look pretty stupid trying to explain that to some magistrate. A great urge to get away suddenly assailed me. The fact was that I had got into a panic quite possibly over nothing at all, and I'd made a bloody fool of myself. My main hope was that nobody would get to hear of it.

CHAPTER TEN

THE others appeared to be in great form when they returned on board, and had evidently enjoyed themselves. I tried to enter into their high spirits, but somehow I couldn't. I felt broody, and thoughts kept chasing themselves through my head. As far as I was concerned, the sooner we got under way the better. I think I must have looked a bit ill at ease. Juliet was ragging with Jenkins, and probably didn't notice anything, but I was sure Susan suspected that something was up. Not that she said anything, but she was observant when it came to that sort of thing. However, my spirits soon began to pick up as we slipped gently down stream and out to sea. It was good to be back on board with my cheerful companions; it gave me a sort of cosy feeling of security. Just what I needed to restore my morale.

As soon as we were clear of the estuary, Jenkins retired below for a siesta, and I had a chance of asking the others how they had got on.

"Well, how did it go?" I asked, eager to hear what they had made of Jenkins.

"He's an extraordinary person," said Susan. "I can't imagine how you manage to get on with him at the Admiralty. He's so entirely different from you."

"I suppose he is, Susan, but for all that I like him in many ways. He's easy to work with, and he keeps us cheerful in the office. We spend half our time teasing him about his trips to places like Deauville and Le Touquet.

He is really very good natured about it. But what did you two make of him?"

"We don't quite know what to think," added Juliet. "I think I feel rather sorry for him really. He seems to be a bit lonely, and I feel he needs someone to look after him."

"Surely you're not suggesting that anyone should marry a fellow like that?"

"No, of course not, Uncle David. But he's not as bad as all that."

"Well, all I can say, Juliet, is heaven help his wife. Anyhow, where did he take you?"

"We went quite a way up," she replied. "I don't know what the place was called, but we pulled into the bank and Puffin produced a flask of brandy . . ."

"Good Lord! Do you mean to say that you've been drinking neat spirits?"

"Well, we tried not to, Uncle David, but he was most persuasive. I don't think we are really quite his type, though," she added. "But he was rather sweet the way he kept us amused by stories of his time as a midshipman, and so on. He was very amusing."

"I see, and was he a good midshipman?"

"No, Uncle David, he seemed to be rather a bad midshipman. I gathered he had his leave stopped most of the time when he was in port."

"Hm, I'm not surprised to hear that. And how about you, Susan? Have you been drinking too?" I added, noticing that she seemed to be rather silent.

"No, Uncle David," she replied. "Only a sip."

"I suppose that means you drained the thing to the last drop. I can see you've both been led astray. The next thing you'll be telling me is that you've roped him in on the nylon business."

She laughed. "I don't think he'd be at all convincing

with the Customs. I'm sure they'd suspect him of every crime under the sun. But I'm sure we've seen him somewhere before., Uncle David. I'll remember soon . . ."

I thought a moment. "Yes, Susan," I added, "you have seen him before. I was just beginning to wonder if either of you would remember."

"When have we seen him?" asked Juliet quickly. "I can't remember."

"Never mind then, let's leave it at that. You may remember one day."

"That's a mean trick," she said. "You can't just go rousing our curiosity and then leave it like that. Come on, Uncle David."

I felt a bit reluctant at giving Jenkins away, but they were insistent. "Well," I replied, "you remember the New Year's party we went to at Frinton, and the couple dancing cheek to cheek . . ."

"It can't be, Uncle David. But what an extraordinary person. He seems so different. I can't believe it."

"Anyhow, it was him all right. I can assure you of that."

There was silence, except for the irregular creak of the gaff aloft as *Fame* rolled on the slight swell.

"And what else did you talk about?"

"Nothing much really. He asked us if we ever went dancing, and we talked about sailing a bit, and so on."

It was a peaceful trip, and as we sat round in the cockpit talking, *Fame* was slipping quietly along with a light breeze coming off shore. I was glad they'd had a good day with Jenkins. Indeed, talking to them had quite taken my mind off my own troubles and worries. It was a peaceful and uneventful trip, and as soon as it grew dark the lights of Walton, Frinton and Clacton lit up almost all along the shore line, sending their reflections across the calm waters. As if drawn by some deep instinct, the head of Jenkins

surfaced from the hatchway, sniffing the breeze. He surveyed the shore lights thoughtfully for some moments, and was just beginning to enlarge once more on the attractions of these places when Juliet's withering scorn shut him up.

Later on that evening I managed to have a quiet discussion with him, while the others were below. Apparently he hadn't seen anything more at Pinmill to arouse his suspicions. However, he still seemed to think that the motor cyclist he had seen there was the same fellow that had followed him down. I found myself beginning to wish he felt a bit more positive about it, but there it was. What puzzled Jenkins most was not only the question of what the man was up to, but also the problem of how he could possibly have known that we would put into Pinmill. After all, they couldn't have every little anchorage picketed.

I wondered if the girls were in the habit of telling anyone before they set sail. Later on when I got the chance I asked Juliet.

"Not specially," she replied. "Of course, Platt always knows, and I have no doubt he gossips a good deal. What made you ask?"

"Nothing special," I rejoined quickly. "It just occurred to me that if there were any telegrams or anything it might be useful."

"Oh, well, Platt generally keeps the village post office informed. We don't really have many telegrams, but if we are more than two or three days away he usually arranges some place for forwarding letters."

I didn't want to start suspecting the faithful Platt. I was sure he was the last person who would be up to any nonsense like that, but I could quite see that if anyone wanted to find out where we were likely to be it would not be very hard.

When we got to West Mersea it was the girls' turn to

be upset. After tea Juliet took Jenkins ashore, as he wanted to telephone someone or other. After which she returned to take Susan and myself ashore. As soon as she came back alongside, I could see that she was looking crestfallen.

"What's the trouble?" I called out as I dropped down into the dinghy.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Puffin seems to have shoved off."

"Shoved off? What do you mean, shoved off? Do you mean to say he has left. Just like that?"

She nodded. "Yes, I went along to the village to buy a paper, and when I returned he had gone. Then I saw that he had left a note in the dinghy. Apparently he has gone over to see his brother at Frinton and hoped we wouldn't mind."

"But he is coming back?"

"I suppose so, Uncle David. All he said in the note was that he would probably be late."

"The blighter," I muttered. "I was looking forward to a cheerful last evening on board. But never mind, Juliet, don't look so downcast."

"Oh, I don't mind," she said, "not in the least. He can please himself as far as I am concerned. It just seemed a bit strange, that was all."

"I expect he got bored," commented Susan frankly, "and felt like a bit of gaiety. He seemed to be pretty bent on Clacton and Frinton when we came round."

"Oh, I shouldn't think it was anything like that," I replied, hoping to cheer them up a bit. "I expect he had some very good reason for wanting to see his brother. Perhaps he's only home on leave for a short time before going overseas, or something like that."

"I didn't realise he had a brother so near," said Juliet. "We might have invited him over."

"He may have said something or other about it," I replied. "I rather forget. Perhaps he did."

"Well anyhow, we can amuse ourselves," commented Susan cheerfully.

We sat there in silence for a bit, while I glanced briefly through the newspapers that Juliet had brought, but there was no mention of my friends being locked in the church.

My thoughts were interrupted by Juliet.

"Do you think we ought to take more interest in parties and dancing and all that?" she asked casually.

"Why did you ask that?"

"Oh, I was just wondering, Uncle David. I don't know that I feel very enthusiastic, but it sometimes seems to me that we wear oilskins and sea boots all day and every day, and that—well—perhaps it might be rather amusing to put on a party frock occasionally."

"Don't include me," put in Susan uncompromisingly.

"Shut up!" rejoined her sister. "You're not supposed to be listening. I was talking to Uncle David."

I thought for a bit. "Yes, Juliet, I think it would be a good plan, and what's more, I'll stand you a party frock.

"On one condition," I added, "and that is that it's not chosen by Platt."

She laughed. "I'd rather you chose it."

"I might even take you dancing," I added.

"I didn't know you danced, Uncle David."

"Well, I don't really, Juliet, but given enough to drink, I'm quite prepared to do anything. Not the Samba or whatever it's called. I'm damned if I'm going to make a fool of myself, but I'll teach you a useful step."

"What's that?" she enquired. "The Foxtrot?"

"Oh, I don't know about that, but you can use this one anywhere. Very handy. But how about this dress now. I

can't imagine you dolled up in anything slinky. And how about you?" I enquired, turning to Susan, who seemed to be looking a bit glum, and was standing in front of her bunk. "You must come in on this."

"No, thank you, Uncle David, you can count me out."

"Oh! What's wrong? Not feeling hurt or anything, I hope."

She turned and looked at me rather solemnly. "Oh! Lord no. It just seems to me to be rather a waste of money, that's all. Take Juliet by all means. Personally, I'd rather save up for a new top sail."

She stood there looking singularly attractive, with a half mutinous expression on her face. I was trying to weigh up just what was in her mind.

"Why do people dance?" she asked, as if in answer to my thoughts.

"No good accusing me, Susan. I tell you I only do it when I'm well oiled. I should have described it as a means to an end—a bad end very often—but not, of course, always. Women are supposed to enjoy it. They say it's the rhythm. I agree that without the music it doesn't seem to work quite so well, so perhaps there is something in that."

It seemed to me that I was getting rather involved, and not making out a very good case. As far as I could see, Susan was beginning to feel hurt, and Juliet perhaps a bit disapproving.

There didn't seem to be very much to do on board, so we went up to the house to have a bath. The Admiral was away in the Isle of Wight at his convalescent home, and so, apart from Platt, we had the house more or less to ourselves. We could, of course, have spent a more comfortable evening on shore, but the girls always slept on board if they possibly could, on principle, and so we duly rowed ourselves off and turned in.

I lay awake long after the others had gone to sleep, thinking of all sorts of things. I was sorry Jenkins had let us down like that. It didn't really matter, but he had proved an unexpected success on board, and I think we had all been looking forward to another cheerful evening together. The cramped quarters of a small yacht very soon showed up the defects in anyone's character, and after a couple of days you usually decide that either you never wish to see them again, or else you regard them as permanent friends. Jenkins was clearly a candidate for the latter category, but I couldn't help wondering what he was up to over at Frinton. I feared the worst. This was the first time I had ever heard him mention anything about a brother. It would be interesting to see what sort of story he produced next day.

Finally I fell asleep. Jenkins must have returned at a very late hour. I vaguely heard him climbing into his bunk, but I was too sleepy to ask him how he had got on.

The following day the fine spell had broken, and it was raining steadily with a continuous patter on the deck of the little vessel. Breakfast was a somewhat silent meal and I was conscious of a strained feeling on board.

"I'm sorry I had to dash off like that," remarked Jenkins presently, as if hunting round for some kind of *rapprochement*.

There was a pause.

"No trouble I hope, Jenkins?"

"Oh, no, thank you, Sir. It was only my young brother. He wanted to get hold of me. The silly ass had run short of money and couldn't pay his hotel bill."

"If it had been my brother," commented Juliet, "I'd

have let him kick his heels for a day or so. I didn't realise you had a brother."

"Blonde or brunette?" I enquired.

"You are very unkind to poor Puffin," she replied. "It's very good of him to spoil his week-end to help his brother like that. It's more than most people would have done. You are far too cynical, Uncle David. I hope you don't go about suspecting us of some ulterior motive all the time."

"I try not to, Juliet."

"What do you mean?"

"I was—er—contemplating your late connection with the hosiery trade," I replied.

She shot me a dark look and then glanced in Jenkins' direction, but he was obviously thinking of other things.

"It must have been maddening for you," I said, addressing myself to Jenkins. "I should have been very annoyed at being kept up so late. I suppose these things take a long time to fix up. Let me see, it must have been about two o'clock before you got back."

"Well, Sir, there was quite a bit to attend to in one way or another."

After that we lapsed into silence again. By the time we had finished breakfast the rain had eased a bit, and we packed our things and went ashore, Juliet and Jenkins taking the dinghy he had borrowed last night, while Susan and I followed in our own. Just as we were loading things on to the car, I heard Jenkins mutter, "Good Lord!" Looking up, I observed that a sports car had drawn up on the other side of the road. In it was seated a smart and attractive young woman. I didn't recognise her at first, but then I remembered the photograph Jenkins had shown me. She was Marcelle.

"Hello, Puffin!" she called out laughingly. "You managed to get back on board all right."

"Yes, thank you," he replied hesitantly. I thought for a moment he was going to introduce us, but looking slightly pink, he explained that we were dashing off back to London and were in rather a hurry. She remained for a moment looking somewhat scornfully I thought at Susan and Juliet in their denims, and then drove off.

"Puffin, how could you tell us you were helping your brother," said Juliet indignantly, "when all the time you were gallivanting round Frinton with that lot."

"It's not quite as simple as that," he endeavoured to explain. "She was—er—you see, part of the difficulty. My young brother had been rather stupid . . ."

"Is that the best explanation you can give?" she interrupted indignantly, and started to walk back to the dinghy.

Poor Juliet, she looked rather crestfallen.

He cleared his throat. "You see, as the eldest member of the family, I felt it was my—er—duty to—er—well . . ."

"Puffin has got a very high sense of duty in these matters," I explained.

"But how did she know you might find it difficult getting back on board?" asked Susan inquisitively, when Juliet was out of earshot.

"Well, when we got back, it looked as if I might find some difficulty in borrowing a boat, I suppose."

"Oh, I see," she replied. "I hadn't realised that she had come all the way back with you."

I could see that poor Puffin was getting into deep water, and the sooner we got him off the better.

We gathered round the Vortex for a final shove, and off he went. I had really meant to go at the same time, but as things had turned out, I felt I had better stop and have a chat. There was no one very much about, and as the weather had cleared, we sat down on the bench nearby.

"Who do you suppose she was?" asked Susan, obviously eaten up with curiosity.

I thought a moment before replying. "Her name is Marcelle."

"Good heavens! Uncle David, do you mean to say you know her, too?"

"No, not really, but I'll tell you about her some day."

"Tell us now."

"I said some day."

"Is he engaged to her, then?" asked Susan brightly.

"No, he is not engaged to her," I replied. "I can tell you that much. At least, I hope not."

"Is she what you call a 'tart', then?"

"My dear Susan, you surprise me. I didn't realise you knew what the expression meant, even. I hope you haven't been asking Platt about these things."

"Don't be silly, Uncle David! We can read books, can't we. But is she . . . ?"

"I shouldn't think so."

"Well, who is she then?"

"I said I would tell you some day. It's quite a long story."

"You are an old meanie. Tell us now."

"No, not now. I've got to get back to the Admiralty. But perhaps next week-end. Meanwhile, stop worrying your little heads."

When I got to my office there was the usual accumulation of signals and reports that had collected over the week-end. Nothing really important, but after two and a half years in the N.I.D. I realised that very often the most dreary and long-winded report might contain the germ of an idea somewhere, and one could never tell what it might lead to. It was seldom that any one report or signal was of

outstanding significance in itself, but it was fascinating how sometimes small items of information from widely differing sources gradually built up the clear picture one needed.

I was longing to have a talk with Jenkins, and hurried through my work, but it was quite late before I had finished. We went to my Club, which was fortunately practically empty, and after fortifying ourselves with some sandwiches and a drink we were soon able to find a quiet corner in the library where we could not be overheard.

"Now then, you old rascal, tell me what you were up to at Frinton."

"Well, Sir, I hadn't of course planned to do anything, but when I got ashore there was Marcelle. I was very surprised to see her, because I thought that if anything was going on she would probably want to keep away. I rather acted on the spur of the moment."

"Yes, Jenkins, I somehow gathered it wasn't entirely your duties as an elder brother that had inspired you."

"No, Sir, I'm afraid I have no brother, but I was keen to find out what she was up to and what on earth could have brought her down to West Mersea, so I suggested that she might come and have supper over at Frinton."

"Was she surprised to see you?"

"Well, she pretended to be, Sir."

"But didn't she think it was a bit strange that you should be ready to desert your own party so quickly?"

"I don't think so, Sir. You see, I pretended that I was very bored and looking for an excuse to get away for a bit. Anyway, I think she looked on it as quite a good way of keeping me under observation. You see, on and off I've got to know her quite well."

"Yes, Jenkins, I'm sure you've made a good job of that. I think the girls have got one or two questions they want

to ask you. But, tell me, did you find out anything interesting? What happened when you got over to Frinton? You drove over in her car, I take it?"

"Yes, Sir. We drove off and had supper at a place called the 'Sea View'. She was obviously trying to find out what I had been doing, but it seemed to me that she rather gave herself away. I think perhaps she thought I had drunk a good deal more than I really had."

"How do you mean, she gave herself away?"

"Only that by taking quite so much interest in what I was doing she seemed to go rather beyond ordinary polite conversation. For instance, she asked all about who we had on board, and wanted to know all about you."

"What did you tell her?"

Jenkins paused. "I told her, Sir, that I didn't really know what you did. That you worked in some Admiralty department, but that I had always been trained not to be too inquisitive."

"And did that satisfy her?"

"I think so, Sir. I told her that I thought you might have something to do with the Wrens, possibly recruiting."

"Oh! And how about yourself?"

"Well, Sir, I thought I had better not say too much about the N.I.D. I merely said that my job was Public Relations."

"Hm! Private Relations might have been more appropriate. But what else transpired?"

"Then she asked where we had been. She didn't, of course, just fire these questions off at me like a sort of interrogation. She seemed to work them into a sort of harmless conversation, and then, after we'd had supper, we danced for a bit and so on . . ."

"I suppose you will be expecting me to authorise an expense account for all this."

He laughed. "I hadn't thought of that, Sir, but it was quite an expensive evening."

"Did you tell her where we had been?"

"I said we had been to Pinmill, yes, Sir. She said that she had been round there yesterday, or else she had met someone who had just been there, I forget which, but apparently there was quite a commotion because someone seems to have been going round locking people in churches. I think she had some sort of idea that it might possibly have been me."

I was just about to intervene, but he made a gesture of deprecation.

"She soon agreed with me that it was more likely that some lunatic was at large."

"Did you gather whether she had any particular interest in this incident?" I asked eagerly.

"I don't think so, Sir. It just came up in the ordinary course of conversation. It did vaguely occur to me that our motor cyclist friend might perhaps have been exceeding instructions, but it seemed such a stupid thing to do that I dismissed it from my mind."

"Oh!" I muttered, "and what else did you discover?"

"Nothing really, Sir. But I feel that I owe some sort of apology to Juliet and Susan. I'm afraid they must have thought that I was rather ill mannered."

"They were a bit put out, but I shouldn't worry too much. I have been wondering, Jenkins, what you thought of the 'Reliable Witnesses'."

"But I'm sorry if they are upset," he persisted. "It was great fun on board with you all. I don't think I've ever enjoyed a week-end more, or felt quite so carefree as I have done in their company."

There was a pause.

"What do you really think of the girls?" I asked.

"What made you ask me that, Sir?"

"Oh, I just thought that, as an expert on women, you might be able to advise," I replied. "You see, I feel rather responsible for them. Their father is more or less an invalid now, and they rather look to me as a sort of unofficial guardian. They've been brought up with few interests other than sailing, and I wanted to widen their horizon a bit."

"I'm not really as expert as you seem to suggest, Sir. In fact, I'm afraid I haven't met very many decent women. My trouble is that when I was young we always seemed to move in fast circles, mostly in places like Biarritz and Cannes, where I used to spend my holidays."

"Did your parents take you to those places?" I asked tactfully, realising how little I really knew of his background.

"Well," he replied, "my father was killed in the first war. He was lost at sea, and my mother went back on the stage where, of course, she mixed with some pretty queer friends. She had to really, in order to get a living and pay for my education."

"What was her stage name?"

"Gloria Day, Sir."

"But she was very well known, Jenkins," I said, taking a renewed interest. "Fancy that. I well remember seeing her. She was in the 'Rajah's Hat', wasn't she?"

"Yes, Sir. That was her first real success. I was very proud of her in those days. All the boys at school used to think I was rather grand having a mother like that, and going to all the smart places for my holidays."

"Is your mother still alive?" I asked quickly.

"No, Sir. She was killed some time ago in a motor accident in the South of France."

"Who looked after you then, after that?"

"Oh, well, by that time I was a midshipman and more

or less on my own. I used to go to relations on my father's side occasionally, but I don't think they approved of me very much, so I generally went and visited my mother's old friends in France when I got leave. That was the trouble, I suppose. I didn't have any other family friends, and so of course I got rather accustomed to night clubs and that sort of life."

"But do you really like that kind of thing?"

"No, not really, Sir, but I suppose one instinctively turns to the sort of things that are familiar. But I must say the sort of life you live on board *Fame* is a most refreshing contrast, and I must admit, too, that I am full of admiration for Juliet and Susan. I can't quite see that one would soon get very fond of them."

"I'm glad you approve of them," I replied. "I've always found them great fun myself; but I thought that perhaps I was a bit old fashioned in my outlook."

I was surprised to find Jenkins thinking like this, and I felt rather guilty in not having found out a bit more about him before. Ever since I'd known him, it had always been a case of my teasing him about some night club or some French resort he was hankering after, or else he was pulling my leg in some subtle sort of way. We had really got on extraordinarily well considering that, in his eyes, I suppose I was rather a starchy sort of individual. Indeed, I was beginning to realise that, apart from strictly service matters, I'd seldom, if ever, had a serious talk with him before. I could see now that he was in fact a different person from what I had imagined. I should never have suspected, for example, that hidden beneath his gay exterior he harboured a kind of wistful longing for more respectable company, and I was just running my mind back to see if I had said anything that might have wounded his feelings, when I realised that he was repeating something he had said.

"I was asking if there was any possibility of going down there for another week-end, Sir? I would like to do that very much. That is if you think the girls would be prepared to have me."

"Yes, of course, Jenkins. Don't worry too much about them. They are young and they'll soon forget; they aren't usually unreasonable. At least, they never have been so far as I can remember. I can't imagine Susan, anyhow, being cross with anyone for long. Nor Juliet either for that matter."

"Juliet was the one I found easier to get on with," he replied. "But she seemed a bit upset with me this morning."

"She is the least shy of the two, and in many ways the more friendly, but I agree that she was a bit put out. I was just wondering if we shouldn't tell them a bit about what we know."

There was a pause. We seemed to have the Club library entirely to ourselves, and apart from the distant murmur of London traffic, the place was silent.

"What do you really think of all this business, Sir?" he asked.

"What do I think? Well, I've been thinking that perhaps we ought to have a pretty frank talk about it. It's a bit late now, but I must say I am a little worried and puzzled about it all. To be honest, I had put the whole thing right out of my mind until you started trying to make my flesh creep with your stories of blonde spies and people shadowing you all over the place."

I looked at him thoughtfully.

"I'm just wondering if you are suffering from some kind of persecution mania. The trouble is it seems to be infectious and now I'm beginning to wonder if perhaps we shouldn't both go and see a doctor."

"It is a bit puzzling," he agreed.

"You see, I have made rather a fool of myself, Jenkins."

"When, Sir?"

"The day before yesterday."

"The day before yesterday, Sir? But how was that?"

"Well, I locked two perfectly innocent people in a church."

"Good Lord! It was you then." He grinned broadly. "I can hardly believe it, Sir."

"Well, it's a fact. The blighters seemed to be following me and—well—it was a deserted sort of place, and I got the wind up. It wasn't till I got back that I realised that they were probably quite harmless."

"There was more than one?" he asked.

"Yes, Jenkins, big ones. Almost as big as your dog."

"Frankly, Sir, I don't like the sound of this very much."

"What, you think that I may be found out then?"

"No, Sir. That's not worrying me. It just seems to me that there is rather a lot going on. Rather a lot of coincidences, if you like to put it that way, and I'm just wondering if perhaps there is something in the wind. Something brewing up. What you say seems to confirm my suspicions that we are being followed. And they wouldn't do that just for fun."

"I suppose not," I commented.

"And it's damned suspicious Marcelle coming down. That anyhow is not imagination. We've seen her in the flesh."

"And touched her in the flesh, too!" I added.

"Well, I don't want to be drawn into that, Sir, but she was there all right. And I must say that having seen her over in Ostend, I should have thought it was taking rather a risk sending her down after me to West Mersea. Unless, of course, the whole thing is a blind. It is possible that they

are deliberately getting us interested in that part of the coast when really they are operating somewhere else."

"Maybe, but the *Dragonfly* seemed to be thereabouts."

"Yes, Sir, that's true. But if they kept us under observation they could easily send her somewhere else."

"You don't think Marcelle was trying to lure you away to Frinton for any particular reason?"

"I thought of that, Sir, and I think it is quite possible."

"What do you think they are doing, then? Landing agents?"

"Yes, Sir. That is what I imagine, or possibly they may be smuggling in propaganda."

"When you say you think something is brewing up, what have you in mind?"

"I don't know at all, Sir. I just felt that they seemed to be paying us rather a lot of attention. They must by now be beginning to wonder how much we know. I think perhaps we ought to watch our steps. Don't you, Sir?"

I was just about to reply when I heard the door at the far end of the library close softly. I looked at Jenkins.

"Damn it! There must have been somebody about. I wonder if he's been listening to our conversation."

"He would have had to be pretty close to hear anything, Sir."

"Yes, I suppose so, Jenkins. But I could have sworn that there was no one in here twenty minutes ago. The blighter must have crept in."

"Perhaps it's one of the servants just having a look in to see why the lights were on."

"Possibly. But I should have thought we would have heard him open the door. Never mind, we can't do anything about it now, and as you say we were talking pretty softly."

I took a look round the library, but there was no one else

there and I came back and sat down beside Jenkins again.

"What were you saying?" I asked.

"I was only suggesting, Sir, that perhaps we ought to mind our step a bit more. I mean to say, one can't help realising that it would be a lot more convenient for someone if we were safely out of the way."

"You are a spooky sort of person. I can't believe that they would do anything like that in this country."

I was about to pursue the matter further when I suddenly realised that it was a good deal later than I thought. In fact, I would have to hurry if I was going to catch the last train.

We got up and left quickly.

It wasn't till I got home that I began to worry about the girls. It never occurred to me before, but living on board by themselves they were in rather an isolated position. There was something ominous about the suggestion Jenkins had put forward and something ominous about the two men I had locked in the church. I wasn't a bit sorry I'd done that now. Pity that they had ever been let out.

I felt very uneasy, but it was too late to do anything that night. Somehow if it had been anyone else who had put the idea into my head I would have discredited it. But there was something very reliable and efficient about Jenkins. I might disapprove of his outlook in certain ways, but I had the feeling that he was the sort of person who was generally right. He was not an emotional type, or highly strung. In fact, he would be a bit phlegmatic really if it wasn't for a sort of cynical gaiety that seemed to colour his character. Certainly not the kind of person whom one would expect to find suffering from persecution mania or hallucinations.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHEN I got up in the morning I found the whole countryside was enveloped in a thick fog. As my train drew in to Waterloo it grew dark and gloomy, and the damp, heavy atmosphere smelled strongly of soot. Not only was the train nearly half an hour late, but the traffic across Westminster Bridge was crawling at a snail's pace. This was a complication as far as I was concerned, as it had been my plan to nip down for the night to West Mersea and have a talk with Juliet and Susan. After last night's discussion it seemed to me that it was high time I put them on their guard. Now this blasted fog had come along to complicate matters. As I hurried across the bridge the hooting of a ship's siren down the river seemed to emphasise the difficulties that lay ahead.

In my office I was glad to find Jenkins waiting for me. I was afraid he might have started off for one of the ports, but as if in answer to my thoughts there he was.

"You are just the man I want, Jenkins. I've been thinking, after our discussion last night, that I ought to have a talk with the crew. It's about time I let them know a thing or two. Now this infernal fog has come along to complicate matters."

"Did you bring your car up, Sir?"

"No, Jenkins, that's one of the snags. It was much too thick . . ."

"I've got mine, Sir, which . . ."

"Gracious! You're not suggesting that I drive down in

—I mean—it's very good of you to suggest it. But frankly—well, it's some time since I've driven a car like that. No, I think I'll have to go by train."

Just at that moment the telephone on my desk rang. I picked up the receiver.

"Yes, Mackenzie, N.I.D."

"Is that you, Uncle David?" said a small metallic voice at the far end.

"Hello, Juliet! What on earth's troubling you?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, Uncle David, but we've been trying to give the engine a run, and we can't find the starting handle. We thought that perhaps for some reason you might have put it somewhere or other."

"The starting handle? I haven't touched it, Juliet. It should be in the engine. Look, I was thinking of coming down this afternoon. How thick is it down there?"

Pip, pip, pip, went the phone, and Juliet's distant voice continued, "Not too bad, Uncle David. You can see about half a mile, perhaps a bit less."

"I mustn't hang on too long, it's just pipped, but expect me about six. I'll get down earlier if I can."

There was a click.

"Hello, hello. Dash it, we've been cut off."

I rattled the receiver. "Exchange, I've been cut off—can you get me through again?"

"What number, Sir?"

"I don't know. It was on the West Mersea exchange."

"Sorry, Sir. If you replace the receiver, they will ring through again."

I waited there for some time, but nothing happened. I expect they were using the public call box about a hundred yards up from the road. She probably rang off.

"Did I understand that someone has been tampering with the engine, Sir?"

"Well it looks rather like it. Look here, I'm going to see if I can't get the afternoon off. I'll go and see the boss."

It was never very difficult for me to get away. I was generally working far later than the ordinary Admiralty hours, besides which I was frequently having to go down to some port or fishing village, so that Captain Thoroughgood left me pretty free to make my own arrangements. I might perhaps have explained to him a bit more of what we were up to, but after our fiasco on the Denghie marshes I didn't think my efforts in the church warranted a fresh approach. Soon I hoped we might have something more positive to lay before him, but in the meantime I was anxious to avoid delay. I could truthfully say to him that I was investigating some reports in the Harwich area.

I caught the 2.50 from Liverpool Street, but the service was considerably disorganised and it was nearly half an hour late in pulling out of the station. It seemed to me that the train literally crawled.

At Chelmsford the visibility seemed to have improved just a shade, and I was relieved to find that the bus service was still running. When I eventually got to West Mersea it was past five o'clock. I couldn't see *Fame* as the visibility was too low, but the grey shadowy shapes of one or two other vessels were just discernable. A light north easterly breeze was stirring, but it did not seem to be having any effect on the fog. Although clearer than the murk I had left behind in London, it was damp and cheerless.

I was glad I had decided to come down. The thought of the two girls isolated out there in this worried me the more I thought of it. I looked back up the road the way I had come, to the public call box, vaguely wondering if the girls had tried to ring through again, but that, of course, was hours ago. It was deserted now. Turning to seaward I put my hands to my face and sent a hail echoing off in the

direction of our moorings. A couple of sea gulls rose up from the water's edge nearby with their discordant cries, but otherwise all was silent. I hailed again, and a third time. Then, to my relief, across the water came an answering cry.

A few moments later and I could see the dinghy coming in to fetch me with the familiar figure of Susan in her blue sweater, standing up and sculling the boat with a single oar over the stern. She waved as soon as she saw me and brought the boat in to where I was standing.

"It's nice seeing you like this in the middle of the week, Uncle David."

There were one or two other people on the road not far away who seemed to be watching, so I thought I had better not say too much until I got on board.

"There is quite a lot I want to discuss with you two, Susan, but we had better get on board first. It doesn't seem to be quite so thick down here."

I looked up at her standing in the stern of the boat with the fog beginning to condense on her hair.

"I think it may clear a little bit," she replied. "This breeze has only just started, but according to the wireless the fog is pretty widespread. However, we've got a good fire stoked up for you, in case you were feeling cold."

Down in the saloon it was indeed warm and cosy. "What's all this about the starting handle?" I asked.

"It's gone," said Juliet, "we think someone's pinched it."

"Anything else missing?" I asked.

"No," she replied. "Nothing missing, but there is a lot of water in the fuel tank."

"Water in the fuel tank? How did you discover that?"

"Well, when we found the starting handle missing, we were both a bit suspicious because it's always been kept in

position ever since we've been in the boat. As you hadn't moved it we came to the conclusion that someone must have been tampering with the engine. I can't think why anyone should want to, but anyway, we then made a careful examination. We haven't found anything else except the fuel . . ."

"What on earth made you look at the fuel? Are you sure there is water in it?"

"Look at this, Uncle David," said Juliet, producing a glass jug full of liquid.

It smelled of petrol, but as soon as I held it up to the light I could see at once that it was hopelessly contaminated.

"You see, we thought that if anyone did want to sabotage the boat, a bit of water in the fuel would be the simplest way of doing it. We didn't discover that until after I rang you up."

"Who do you think has done this, Juliet?"

"We suspect it must be the *Dragonfly*. We can't see who else would want to do it. If they particularly wanted to keep us out of the way, it would be an obvious thing to do. We think they must have nipped across and done this while we were ashore. It wouldn't take more than a couple of minutes, you see."

"Perhaps they are planning something big," added Susan.

"Where is the *Dragonfly* now?" I asked. "Is she in harbour?"

"No, Uncle David. She left about four hours ago. It was fairly thick at the time, but they'd get out in anything."

"There is quite a bit I have been meaning to tell you two," I replied. "There have been one or two rather suspicious things that have been going on lately, but before we get down to that, how about the engine? I suppose it's out of action."

"We've drained down the fuel," replied Juliet. "We did that straight away to prevent it rusting the tank, and we've brought off a couple of jerry cans. But we are huffed with no starting handle. I've been round to the yard and up to the garage, and they don't seem to have anything except the ordinary car starting handle, but they have the wrong sort of fitting."

"There is someone hailing us," said Susan, springing up.

We listened. Sure enough the distant cry of "*Fame ahoy*" greeted our ears.

Susan quickly dropped down into the dinghy and was soon on her way inshore, leaving Juliet and myself on deck wondering who on earth it might be. I had a sort of feeling that it was Jenkins. Not that I recognised his hail, but more, I think, because I was half expecting him.

"I suppose all your halliards and gear on deck are all right?" I asked, suddenly wondering if perhaps someone had been round with a knife.

"Susan has examined them all carefully, Uncle David, and has been aloft too. She did that when I was ashore trying to get another starting handle. Uncle David, do you think it's the *Dragonfly* that's been doing this?"

"Yes, Juliet, I do. I've always been worried about the *Dragonfly* as far as you people were concerned. They are a bad lot, and up to no good. As soon as Susan returns I'll tell you a bit more. Who do you think this is coming off?"

"It sounded like Puffin, but I can't imagine what he wants at this hour. I should have thought that on an evening like this he would have preferred the city lights."

They were drawing near and appeared, by the way Susan was rowing, to be in a hurry. It was Jenkins all right. As soon as the boat touched alongside, he swung himself on board.

"Sir, there is something very important I want to tell

you." He had a paper in one hand and sounded breathless and excited.

"What is it?"

He looked at the girls, and hesitated a moment.

"Go on," I said, "don't worry about them."

"Well, Sir. Is the *Dragonfly* about, because if not we must get under way and go after her at once."

"We can't, Jenkins, that's the trouble. Some B.F. has gone and dished the engine."

I don't think I had ever seen Jenkins quite so excited before.

"Sir, look at this." He unfolded the paper in his hand and pointed to the headlines. "There is not much time to lose."

It was getting too dark to read the print, but there was no mistaking the heavy bold type at the top of the front page.

GOVERNMENT SCIENTIST MISSING

PROFESSOR JULIUS VANISHES

"Good Lord! But what makes you think that this has anything to do with the *Dragonfly*?"

"There isn't much time to explain, Sir. If she has got much start on us it will be too late. If you read this article you'll see that this fellow was last seen at the 'Blue Angel'. He is apparently connected in some way with the development of guided missiles."

"But how about the Admiralty or the Police?"

"Well, Sir, if we delay now, the last chance of rescuing this poor devil may be lost. No doubt they will begin to take this more seriously now, but you know how sceptical they've been. This only appeared in the late edition. I thought I had better get down here as quickly as I could.

It's been the hell of a drive, but fortunately most of the traffic is off the road."

"But what can we do, Jenkins?" I insisted. "We can't start the engine."

"If you say where you want to get to," interrupted Susan, "let's see if we can't do it under sail. Engines always let you down in any case," she added scornfully.

It was not exactly an inviting possibility. With night closing in rapidly and with a visibility of little more than fifty yards, if that, it was not going to be an easy task threading our way out of the crowded anchorage. Even under power it would be quite tricky.

"Well, Jenkins, the crew seems willing. Personally, I shouldn't have thought there was much we could do about it even if we can get out of here, which seems rather doubtful. What do you suggest?"

"Well, I don't know how the tides work out, but it seems to me that if we can get round to Denghie Flats—Ray Sand Channel, or whatever you call it, by high water, we've a good chance of intercepting the *Dragonfly* there. I don't know how far it is."

What the girls can have thought about this sudden and unexpected turmoil in the otherwise peaceful life on board, I can't imagine, but if they had any doubts either as to our sanity or our integrity, they certainly showed no sign. Indeed, Susan was already poring eagerly over the chart and making some quick calculations.

"If it's getting out of here that's worrying you," said Susan, "we should be able to manage that. We've done it before. It's about two hours after low water now, and there should be enough over the bar, but if we don't get out before the flood starts making, we may find this breeze isn't enough. So the sooner we slip the better."

Juliet and I quickly got the tiers off the main, and

commenced setting sail, while Susan and Jenkins went into a council of war over the chart table. I must say that, in spite of all my growing misgivings, this development had come as a sudden surprise, and I couldn't quite see what we were proposing to do about it. Supposing, for instance, we came across the *Dragonfly* in the middle of the night somewhere, which seemed highly improbable, we couldn't very well just go and beat them up. Supposing they were innocent, we'd look pretty stupid, or, what was more than likely, we would find they were quite ready to beat us off—what then? As I sweated up on the halliards, I couldn't help feeling that we were being perhaps rather stupid. There didn't seem to be much wind either, and I was just beginning to wonder how we were going to negotiate our way down the narrow channel among all these other craft, when Susan's voice sang out for us to slip.

There was a splash as Juliet let the mooring buoy drop back into the water, and we were under way. Fortunately we were facing down harbour when we slipped, but the stream started to sweep us up towards the next boat in the trot. For a few moments I thought we were going to fall foul of her bowsprit, but just in time Susan backed the head sails and eased off the main sheet. *Fame* swung round and slowly drew clear, so that all that was needed was a slight shove with the end of the boat hook, and we were on our way.

Sheeting the main in again, and letting draw the head sails, so that we were close hauled, we slowly gathered way, towing our dinghy behind us. As we did so, I could feel the breeze freshening almost imperceptibly. The ship heeled ever so slightly, and we started to glide through the foggy night. Only the faint rippling noise as the boat cut through the calm water and the occasional creak of some block aloft broke the stillness of the night. It was remarkable the way

Fame ghosted along in these light breezes, and I couldn't help feeling glad that we had got our new Genoa jib. I had been posted as lookout, and took up my position forward where I could watch the sail drawing steadily.

The moon had evidently risen, making the fog into a sort of beautiful silvery mist. If it had been on some other occasion and not quite so damp and chilly, I would have enjoyed the beauty of the scene. As it was, my thoughts were filled with a sense of uneasy foreboding. Every now and then the silent and ghost-like shadows of another boat at her moorings would loom up close at hand, and glide past us until it was lost to view astern.

Presently we seemed to have the sea to ourselves, and I was just wondering if we had got clear of the creek when Susan called out for us to tack. We went about twice. Exactly what she had to guide her I couldn't tell. There was nothing in sight, but I knew from the chart that the Channel at that state of the tide was none too wide. Then I noticed that Susan had eased off the sheets and we seemed to have picked up a bit more headway. Indeed, in the calm water we must have been making all of three and a half knots.

"Ah, there she is!" called out Susan, indicating what looked like a buoy away on our starboard beam. "That's the end of the Nass. It's all clear now."

I came aft and took the tiller while she went below and studied the chart. I wondered how much her father had taught her about the actual navigation or whether, as I suspected, she had really picked most of it up herself. I also wondered if Jenkins had been impressed or whether he just took all this part of the business for granted.

I could hear them discussing plans below, and through the dimly-lit companion-way I could see they had the chart spread out on the saloon table and were measuring distances.

Presently Juliet came up on deck with a bowl of the most delicious and savoury soup for me. It was steaming hot and tasted excellent. A good effort, I thought, considering the confusion that had so suddenly descended on us. The others followed, each carrying their own bowl, and we gathered round in the little cockpit to discuss plans.

"I have been explaining to these two," said Jenkins, when we had all wedged ourselves in, "a bit of what we have discovered, Sir, and I think now that we should work out some sort of idea as to how we are going to tackle these people, if we come across them. According to Susan's calculations it's high water down off Denghie round about half past ten."

"We should, with luck, get there a bit before that," put in Susan, "but, of course, we don't know how long it would take to find them in this visibility. It's not going to be easy."

"But assuming that we do contact them," resumed Jenkins, "as far as I can see they won't be able to get anyone off from the head of that little creek much before the top of high water. Say forty minutes before. It's about five miles back to their ship, so I can't see that they are likely to get the party back on board the *Dragonfly* before we arrive on the scene. Specially as this breeze seems to be holding."

We were all sitting round in the cockpit, well muffled up in our duffle coats, while the *Fame*, with a slow, leisurely roll, appeared to be slipping quietly and remorselessly on her way. The situation seemed incredible and unreal to me. I suppose that vaguely I had half expected something like this to happen in the end. But now that we were actually face to face with the possibility, the whole thing seemed to be more like a dream than the real thing.

"I don't know, Sir, if you have any particular plan for tackling these people."

I thought for a moment, but a vacant sort of feeling came over me. I suppose it was because things had developed too quickly for me. I had been unable to plan for this sudden development in advance, and I was now beginning to wish I was ten years younger, and could make my mind a bit more flexible. But somehow every idea that entered my head ran across one of two snags. Either they would pretend to be a perfectly innocent party out fishing, or else they would simply refuse to allow us on board. And then what? After all, we hadn't a clue as to what Professor Julius looked like, or whether he was a willing victim or not. It seemed to me we had been rather rash in starting off so hurriedly.

"I don't know what to suggest," I replied. "I hoped that perhaps you might have some idea."

"How many of them are there on board normally?" asked Jenkins.

"There are three of them usually—" Juliet replied, "Maitland and Batt, and they have a paid hand, but that is all as far as I know."

"That being the case," continued Jenkins, "I don't suppose there will be any more apart from Julius. Otherwise they would have to overload their dinghy. That would make them four all told. Four men at least, and I need hardly say that they will be pretty desperate if they get cornered, so we've got to mind what we are doing. I suppose you have no firearms on board? I've brought my revolver."

"So that's why you're carrying it about," murmured Juliet. "Did you know all this was going to happen, then?"

"No," he replied, "not exactly. The whole of this has developed rather more quickly than I expected. When I came down before, it was really just to have a preliminary look round."

"We can do you a Very light pistol," put in Susan. "It should be quite effective at close range."

"You've got the right idea, anyhow," continued Jenkins. "I shouldn't like to cross your path! But that's all the better, because I'm not at all sure that you two girls won't have the most dangerous bit to do."

"What's your plan then?" I asked.

"Well, Sir," he said. "The first thing to do, of course, is to locate the *Dragonfly*, preferably without being seen ourselves. With luck we may find that their dinghy is still inshore, but we can't count on it. We could, of course, run alongside and jump across, but we would look pretty stupid if by some chance I was wrong, or they had changed their plans, and we suddenly went bursting in on a perfectly innocent party, bristling with revolvers and Very light pistols. Besides which, someone is bound to get hurt if we set about it like that."

"Or on a night like this we might find that we had boarded the wrong ship," added Juliet.

"Quite, that's why I think we must be a bit more careful than that."

"We could, however, go over in the dinghy for a friendly chat, I presume," he continued.

"Not all of us," said Susan. "We would swamp. She will only just hold three at the most, and then only if it's calm."

"Very well, then, we will have to go over in two trips."

"Yes, if Susan and I go over first they won't suspect anything," added Juliet. "We have often been over to visit them on a fine evening."

"That's all very well from that point of view," he commented, "but supposing the whole lot of them are on board. They might kidnap you two as well, and sail off with you both. Then we should look pretty old fashioned. What do you think, Sir?"

"Well," I said, "there is no doubt that the girls often

have been over visiting the *Dragonfly*, and if they suddenly came on board, it would be quite a natural thing to do. After all, that's more or less what happened when they found her alongside the *Pultava*. It seems to me we can tell better how they are placed when we see whether the dinghy is still ashore, or whether it is riding astern. Or perhaps we may find it hoisted on deck ready for getting under way."

"That seems sound," said Jenkins, "but you don't think then that either you or I should be with them?"

"My suggestion is that I ought to row them over, and see how it's looking; one of us would have to do that in any case, in order to bring the dinghy back."

"One of the girls could do that," he answered.

"No," said Susan, "Uncle David has never been over before, he has always stayed to look after the *Fame*, and they might suspect something, whereas Juliet and I always pop over when we get a chance. We know Maitland quite well. I'm sorry he's mixed up in all this. I wonder if he really is. We realised that he was a bit of a smuggler, but this seems much more serious."

"One can never be absolutely certain, Susan, but I think there is a lot in what you say about not raising their suspicions. I'm afraid it's rather like using you two as bait in a trap. But if they did smell a rat and round up one of us men to start with, it would be damned difficult to extricate ourselves. In fact, short of a free fight, I don't see what we could do. The fact is, we are absolutely dependent on catching them by surprise, preferably one by one. If you, Sir," he said, turning to me, "and these girls are game, I think it's the only way we are likely to get away with it."

I listened with fascination as Jenkins methodically developed his plan of action. He was quite different from the sort of night club habitu   I had always pictured him to be, lounging round the Casinos of Europe. In a calm and

logical way he was working out what each of us should do. The more I listened to him the more I envied him his quickness of mind. After all, in the space of an hour or so we might well find ourselves in a very tight corner, and here he was apparently unmoved. It was just as well to run through every possibility in our minds, and I was glad to note how thorough he was being.

"Well, Sir, if that's all agreed then," said Jenkins, "we will make a cautious approach in the dinghy. Perhaps you could row the girls over and have a look first. We don't want them to see a strange man like me about the place. If their motor boat is away you may be able to put them on board without being seen, and get some idea of how many of them there are. I expect if their boat is still inshore, there will only be one or two. Then you could come back for me. But if you find there is a whole crowd, then you can make some excuse about it being too late, and bring the girls back before we get ourselves into too serious difficulties."

"Very good," I replied, "and what next? We still won't know when to crack them on the head."

"That's the difficulty, Sir," continued Jenkins. "We can't start cracking people on the head till we are absolutely certain they are the right people to crack. I don't exactly like the idea of leaving the girls on board for long, but certainly the best way is for you to take them over for a friendly visit, and then you and I could lie off in the dinghy just beyond visibility, and await the return of the rest of the party from on shore, and see what develops. As soon as they go below, we could then creep on board and take them by surprise."

Fortunately it was a calm night, with only a slight breeze. Just what we needed. We seemed to be keeping up our speed through the water, and now had the wind fairly free on our port beam. As far as I could see Susan was

navigating from buoy to buoy. We passed first one and then another, looking dark and forbidding in the night, and then we appeared to alter course more to the southward. I took the wheel so that Susan could keep an eye on the chart, and make sure we didn't go over into too shallow water. It would be simply maddening if we stranded ourselves at this crucial moment. As I gazed at the dimly lit compass card, a chilly sense of foreboding seemed to grip me once more. Should I take charge of these young people and turn back, or would we drift on recklessly to some adventure that might have a tragic ending? I shivered, and buttoned up my duffle coat round my neck. After our first moment of surprise we had all started off so gaily without a thought of what might really happen, stimulated by a sense of adventure, no doubt. But now that we were drawing near, with perhaps less than an hour to go, I was becoming more aware every moment of the risks we were running. I began to realise that no one on shore had the faintest idea of our whereabouts, or what we were up to. And here we were, on a foggy night out of sight of land, endeavouring to waylay a gang of thugs. Desperate men who could not only overpower us, but who clearly would scruple at nothing in order to elude capture and get away to the safety which the Russian world offered them. It was all very well for Susan light-heartedly to produce a Very light pistol, but without any doubt these people would be heavily armed with revolvers, knuckle dusters, coshes, and daggers. And even if our bodies were washed up, it would be days or even weeks before they might be discovered, and nobody would ever know who had done it. Somehow I found it hard to believe that we could really be mixed up in anything quite so fantastic. I had often read about this sort of thing in thrillers, but of course one never expected that the real thing would happen to oneself. Then I recalled

that this kind of affair was quite commonplace behind the Iron Curtain, and the full reality of what we were doing thrust itself upon me.

I was still hesitating as to whether I should not insist on some more prudent course of action when Jenkins forestalled me.

"Well, Sir, if we succeed in rounding this lot up we will have done a good job. It's damned serious the way so many of these experts are whisked away like this. I'm only hoping that if we pull this off it may put a stop to it. It's worth taking a risk to do that, don't you agree, Sir?"

I could hardly disagree.

"We had better darken ship," added Jenkins as we drew closer, "we can't be more than four miles away." I felt that Jenkins was really in charge of the party now, and we carried out his orders silently. We crouched round on deck, keeping a sharp look out, and drinking great mugs full of hot cocoa which Juliet had produced.

"Now, is everyone more or less clear what the plan is?" asked Jenkins. "We can't have anything too rigid, because we don't know how things are going to turn out. But anyhow I very much doubt if they will be expecting any trouble out here."

"I take it," asked Juliet, "that after Uncle David has left us aboard the *Dragonfly* we do absolutely nothing till we hear you shouting on deck, and then we can clock anyone with anything we have handy."

"Yes, that's more or less right," agreed Jenkins. "You two will just have to use your initiative. I should start by pretending that your Uncle David is coming back to collect you in an hour's time, and try to keep them talking and take a whistle in case you want to recall us. You realise, of gossiping below as much as possible. And you had better course, that this is going to be a pretty risky business. They

may try to dispose of you. 'Liquidate' is the expression, I believe, so keep your wits about you." Jenkins was silent for a while. Presently he spoke again. "I must say I don't altogether like the idea of leaving you two alone, but I suppose we shan't be far off in the dinghy."

"We'll be all right, Puffin," said Juliet. "If there is any nonsense, we'll biff them in the face with a bottle or something before they are expecting it."

"Yes, well, you want to be ready for emergencies. It would be a good plan to look round for some sort of weapon the moment you get down into the saloon."

Just at that moment we came up with a flat-topped can-shaped buoy which Susan informed us was the North East Buxey. We gybed over on to a South Westerly course.

"How do you propose finding the *Dragonfly*?" I asked her.

"Well, Uncle David, I have discussed that with Puffin, and we both felt that in this weather she would be certain to keep fairly close to some prominent mark. She could, of course, choose one of the buoys round hereabouts. There are rather a number, however, and it would be very easy to get the wrong one. Far the best mark is the Beacon itself, and they always do anchor fairly close to the north of it."

"I see, and you'll just sail on till we find her."

"No, we thought that would be too risky. We'll round up in about twenty minutes and ride to our anchor. I'm timing her on the clock and giving her three knots. We won't be far out. Then we will have to take a look round in the dinghy."

We sailed on quietly for a bit. With the wind more or less astern it felt as if it had dropped altogether, but presently Susan called out in a low voice for us to stand by.

A moment later and we had the mainsail off her and were busily stowing it while the ship drifted on under her

head sails. Without the steadying effect of the main, she rolled considerably, but we still seemed to be drifting through the water.

"The tide is settling down in any case," commented Susan, as if in answer to our thoughts.

"But won't we make a frightful noise when the cable runs out?" I asked.

"We are not going to use the cable," she replied. "Juliet is up forward now and bending our main warp on to the anchor. I've asked her to veer the anchor down into the water so that there shouldn't be any splash."

They seemed to have thought out everything, and it flashed through my mind that in the old days all our most resourceful seamen were recruited or press ganged from the trade. Perhaps the girls, with their smuggling instincts, were being true to type. All I could do was to hope fervently that their thoroughness would be rewarded.

Meanwhile Susan had left the tiller and was busy taking a sounding. She did this twice, after which, at her suggestion, I went up forward to help Juliet. Presently there was a loud whisper from Susan, and we had the headsails off her and were busily veering the warp out over the bow. At first I thought it wasn't going to hold her, but presently the rope taughtened out and *Fame* swung slowly round.

"She's going to be all right," commented Susan, who had joined us up forward, as we watched the warp straighten out and take the weight of the ship. "The tide is not very strong here really."

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE next thing was to get the dinghy away. We hauled it alongside, and while Susan was down below making a last check up on the chart, the rest of us, under Juliet's direction, were busy getting things down into the boat. The oars, rowlocks, a lead line and a small boat's compass followed in quick succession, then a spare oar, after which Juliet and Susan sprang lightly down and we were all set.

"I must say, Jenkins," I whispered, as I stood there in the dinghy, still holding on to the rail, "I don't much like the idea of leaving these two on board alone. Don't you think I had better stay there with one of them?"

"All right, Sir, do whatever you think is best. You are probably right, it might be better. Anyhow, good luck, and send Juliet back for me as soon as you can, and I hope you don't get lost. Don't forget you must let the boat get clear away before you rouse them below, otherwise they may try to send you back. Good luck."

I let go, and the tide slowly carried the little boat away. Soon *Fame* was little more than a dark shadowy shape, and all we could hear was the lapping of the water alongside as she rolled at her anchor.

With our rowlocks well muffled with cotton waste, we set out on our search. While I crouched up forward as lookout, Juliet took the oars. Further aft, squatting in the bottom of the boat where she had the compass, was Susan.

"She won't be far from here," she assured us in a whisper.

It felt extraordinarily lonely in this little boat so far from the land, and with nothing in sight, except the dark patch of sea in our immediate vicinity, and the silvery canopy of the moonlight fog. I felt very close to the water, and very far from everything else.

"I hope you will be able to find your way back," I whispered in Juliet's ear.

"I'll be all right," she answered, "we've often done this sort of thing before."

A moment later there was a sharp whisper from Susan. "There she is, we've almost passed her."

I looked quickly in the direction she indicated, and could see at once that almost abeam of us was the dark shape of a vessel. She looked much too big, I thought at first. Then I noticed that there was a shaft of light shining from some scuttle or dead light, and I realised that she was much closer than I had imagined.

In actual fact, I don't suppose she can have been more than a quarter of a mile from where the *Fame* was lying, but somehow it seemed a good deal further. Susan leant forward and whispered something which I missed, but Juliet turned the boat and paddled her in the opposite direction until we were out of sight.

"We are going to get up stream so that we can drop down on her from right ahead," she explained. "They won't be keeping a look out to seaward, and we can let the tide take us down."

Carefully we paddled round till we were in the right position, and then, starting to make our approach again, suddenly we heard the main hatch being slid back. A shaft of light shone up on the mizzen rigging and someone came up on deck. scarcely a hundred feet ahead of her and drifting steadily down, we remained motionless, hardly daring to breathe. Then he emptied a bucketful of something over the

side, rinsed the bucket and disappeared below. I heaved a sigh of relief.

"Now's your chance, Juliet, we'll just have to hope that he won't come up again. Put her alongside the rigging."

With a quick flick of the oar she had spun the boat round and Susan, who had been crouching ready, seized hold of the rail.

"For God's sake, don't let her bump," I whispered, as I rose up and helped to hold her off.

In a moment Susan had climbed quietly on board and I had followed. We stood there for a second and watched Juliet paddle off, then tip-toed quietly aft in our gym shoes.

"Helló!" shouted Susan boldly as we slid back the hatch. "Anyone on board?"

There was a noise below. "Who's there?" called out a voice. The doorway into the saloon opened and a bright light flooded the companion way into which we were peering anxiously. I wondered how many there would be. It would be distinctly awkward if we found four hulking great men on board.

"Sandy," she replied, promptly recognising his voice, "it's me. It's Susan. We've just come over for a visit."

In an instant he was at the foot of the ladder gazing up at us.

"I've brought Uncle David over this time for a change," she continued, as she descended purposefully down the ladder. In a moment we were in the saloon blinking in the bright light.

"Evening, Maitland," I said quickly. "I hope you don't mind an informal visit. I see you are alone."

He remained standing uncertainly while Susan and I seated ourselves on the settees.

"That is a fine warm stove you've got," I said, holding

my hands over it. "It's quite a chilly evening out in this fog."

Maitland perched himself awkwardly next to Susan. "You surprised me," he said at length. "I didn't hear you anchor."

"We've been in for an hour or so," I replied. "It is quite thick really and we never noticed you either. We're anchored farther out than you are."

"It's a bit late to offer you anything," he said discouragingly. "I expect you've had your supper. What's happened to Juliet? You haven't left her behind this time?"

"Don't bother to get anything for us, please," I assured him. "We only came over for a gossip."

"Juliet brought us over," said Susan, "but she's gone back to fetch a friend."

"I hope she's not going to be late," he commented quickly. "We were planning to make an early start."

"I'm so sorry if this is inconvenient," I replied, "we didn't realise. Are your friends—er—inshore?"

"Fishing," he said. "It's very good for plaice in the Ray Sand channel. We often come here."

I could see that they had thought of every possibility. Even for a chance encounter out here they had their cover plan worked out to the smallest detail.

"Do you always have to do it at night?" I asked.

"No, not always. It's a question of the tide. You get them best on the flood."

"I see," I replied. There was a pause. "But the tide is ebbing now, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, it should begin to ebb soon," he answered. "As a matter of fact we find that round about high water is the best time of all."

"Then you won't be expecting them for some time."

"Oh, no, not yet awhile."

"I was afraid that you might have been in a hurry to get under way," I continued.

"Juliet and Puffin should be here soon," reminded Susan. "I expect they've been doing the washing up to give us a surprise."

"Look here," said Maitland, rising up. "I don't want to sound inhospitable or anything like that, but this really is rather inconvenient. I promised Jim I would have everything ready for a quick start."

"Oh, I'm sorry," I replied, "but the others ought'nt to be long. I'm afraid we can't very well leave till they come."

"I'll go up and look," said Susan quickly. "I thought I heard them." She scrambled up the ladder and pottered about on deck for a bit and then returned.

"No luck?" I enquired, raising my eyebrows.

"No," she answered, "I thought I heard something, but there is nothing to be seen. It seems to be a bit thicker."

"Perhaps we can help you get ready, Sandy?" she said after a pause.

"Oh, lor' no. Don't you bother. I wouldn't want to trouble you. But perhaps I could go up and hail them."

"It's not much good doing that," I said. "They'll come back here as soon as they can. Perhaps they've had a hitch of some sort."

"They may have broken an oar," added Susan. "We ought really to keep a spare one in the boat. I don't think shouting at them will help very much."

"They may have lost their way," he suggested.

"Not very likely," said Susan, "you can almost see *Fame* if you stand up forward."

"Oh, well, it can't be helped," said Maitland, looking anxiously at his wristwatch, "but I think I'll have a look round."

"I'll go," said Susan, springing quickly forward and climbing up the ladder.

She remained there for some time looking carefully all round. Then she climbed up a bit higher and sat on the combing.

"Anything doing?" I enquired.

"I can't see anything, Uncle David," she replied as she slid below again. "The breeze seems to be coming more from the north. It's a bit chilly too. Do you mind if we close the door, Sandy?"

"Come over by the stove if you are cold," he said.

"I'm quite all right here," she replied, "now the door is closed. Actually your saloon is much cosier than ours."

This was the first time I had been down below in the *Dragonfly* and looked round with interest. She was larger than *Fame*. About seventeen tons to our twelve, I guessed. The chief improvement was that they had rather more space at the bottom of the companion-way. In *Fame* the ladder came down more or less straight into the saloon. But here there was quite a bit of space with a galley on one side and quite a good place for oilskins and sea boots on the other. A very convenient layout for cruising, and she was much better finished inside the saloon, too. No one could call *Fame* very smart. Utility and strength were the hall marks, but here they had mahogany panelling, with a fine scrubbed teak table.

"What is the history of *Dragonfly*?" I asked. "She's an extraordinarily fine ship. How old is she?"

"Yes, she's very well built," he replied. "She belonged to the Kriegs-marine in Germany originally, and I think became Admiralty property when the Germans were defeated. They sailed a lot of them over here you know, but then they found they were too expensive to keep up, and so they sold most of them off. This was one of the best. She

was built by K. & A. Ansmidt at Flansberg in 1939." He jerked a thumb to indicate the builder's plaque that was presumably in the cockpit somewhere conspicuous. "I don't think she had been used very much though. Certainly the sails looked quite new."

"How about the engine?"

"Oh, well, she had a beautiful job. The German diesels were the best in the world. But it is impossible to get spare parts now, and very reluctantly I decided that the only thing to do was to fit a British make. They are very good these days. Actually this is a Kelvin, and I must say it's done us remarkably well. We've never had any trouble."

I don't know how long we went on discussing his ship, it must have been for some considerable time. I noticed that as soon as we got him talking on this subject, he at once took an interest, and seemed to forget his other worries. Whatever else he was up to, there was no doubt that he was a seaman at heart and was intensely proud of his vessel. It was difficult to believe that Maitland, whom I think all of us rather liked, was steeped in some treacherous plot. I almost felt like having it out with him there and then, but that would have been far too risky.

"This is the stove Daddy liked so much," said Susan, turning to me. "We've got one in *Fame*, but somehow it doesn't seem to draw so well."

"We had a lot of difficulty with this one at first," he replied. "The trouble in a yacht is that you seem to get a down-draught out of the mainsail. Eventually I had to design a special top myself. I had it made by a garage in Colchester."

Then he began to get restless again.

"I think I had better have a look round," he said, jumping up and making for the door. Susan rose and followed

him up the ladder, presumably to distract his attention in case he spotted our dinghy lying off. She was playing her part well.

Left alone in the saloon I began looking along the little tier of books that were securely wedged on either side of the mast. Carefully arranged, I noticed, so that they would stay in place when the ship rolled. There was an extensive array of Sailing Directions ranging from the Baltic Pilot to the Biscay Pilot, and an extremely handy little Tidal Atlas that I had never seen before. I pulled it out and examined it with approval. We must get one, I thought, memorising the name. On the lower shelves were a number of well-known books on sailing. *Yachting Sails and Yachting Tales*, yes, and *Suffolk Sea Borders*. How I loved reading them. I had almost forgotten what I was doing when my eye caught the unmistakable sight of the ship's log book. I was just about to pull it out when I heard Susan and Maitland coming down into the saloon again. I started back and sat down on the settee.

"Look here," he said, "I'm afraid I must ask you to hail your friends. Dash it, it's half past eleven, and quite frankly your visit is most inconvenient."

"I've no objection to hailing them," I replied untruthfully, and wondering how I could get out of it. "That is to say if you wish me to. I don't think it will do any good."

"What's the objection?" he asked.

"Well, we arranged for them to come over as soon as they could. If they were able to do so they would have been here some time ago. Shouting at them won't help if the dinghy's sprung a leak or if they've lost a rowlock."

"Come up on deck and tell me where you are anchored," he said firmly. "I'll hail them on the megaphone."

I followed him up on deck where Susan was still standing.

"Where's the *Fame*?" I asked her.

"I can't see her at the moment," she said, "but she must be somewhere right ahead."

I managed to mutter in her ear, "Take care he doesn't push you overboard. I think he's getting desperate." But I don't think she heard.

He raised the megaphone and sent a long drawn out "*Fame* ahoy-y-y" vibrating through the darkness. We all listened intently. I could hear my heart thumping with anxiety as I waited for the response. We hadn't thought of this and it might upset the whole thing. Of course, if Batt and his party were just returning the sound of Maitland hailing *Fame* like that might well make them keep away. No doubt, I thought, that was one of the reasons why he had been so keen on hailing her. I wondered what Susan was thinking. But all she said was, "I think she must be lying a bit more over to the left."

Again the long drawn out "*Fame* ahoy-y-y" (I wondered whether Jenkins would realise it wasn't my voice), but still no reply. I very nearly blurted out, "Thank heaven", but checked myself just in time.

At first I was afraid he might see them lying off ahead of the ship somewhere, or that they might give themselves away by answering, but now I was beginning seriously to wonder where they had got to. It had thickened a bit since we came over, and I realised that Susan and I would be in a distinctly awkward spot if by some mischance they had rowed off in a slightly wrong direction. Perhaps by now they were rowing madly round in circles wondering where on earth they had got to.

"We are lying a good deal farther off than you think," I commented.

He gave one more long cry in the direction of *Fame* and then we returned to the saloon.

"We must keep him talking," I murmured to Susan as we followed him below.

"Your friends seem to have left you nicely in the lurch," he said when we were seated again.

"I expect they've had some trouble with the dinghy and are calmly tucked in their bunks waiting for a kind *Dragonfly* to bring us back in their motor boat," I retorted. "Incidentally, when are you really expecting your friends to return?"

He gazed up at the skylight without answering.

"Is this a photo of the *Dragonfly*?" I asked, pointing to a well framed picture of a yacht that was screwed to the bulkhead over by the door.

"Yes," he replied, coming out of his trance and brightening a little as he looked at the picture. "I'm rather fond of that one. I took it myself not long after I bought her. She was painted white then. I took it from the motor dinghy one fine day over in Holland. It's extraordinary how seldom one seems to get a chance of photographing one's own ship under way. It's always too much trouble, or else the weather is too bad."

"She looks very attractive there," I replied, going over to the picture and examining it more closely. "I see you have a number on the sail. Have you ever been in for any of these ocean races?"

"I went in for one," he said rather listlessly. "The first year I had her, I entered for the race over to the Hook of Holland. We came in second in our class. But I prefer cruising really."

The conversation continued for some time on the various ports and places he had visited and some of the cruises he had done in the winter. I couldn't help beginning to feel some sympathy for my opponent. I wondered if he were a willing accomplice. I could hardly bring myself to believe

that he was a Communist sympathiser by conviction. Perhaps he was held by some threat of blackmail or maybe, like the girls, he resorted to this as being the only way he could afford to keep his boat going. No doubt these things start in a small way until one gradually gets more and more involved and finally you find it is impossible to extricate yourself.

"You certainly have a great reputation for the way you take this ship around in all weathers," I added.

"Do I?" he replied in a distracted tone of voice.

Just at that moment there was a bump alongside and voices could be heard. I drew my breath, Maitland shot a glance in my direction. He looked deathly white.

There was a thump on deck, a noise of footsteps and the hatch slid back.

"Sandy," a voice called out gruffly, "you awake?" and a moment later Batt slid down into the saloon.

"What the devil's all this?" he demanded as he looked round, blinking in the bright light. There was a pause . . .

For the first time I realised that Maitland was only a subordinate in this organisation. He remained transfixed by the look in Batt's eye, and seemed to edge away into the corner of the saloon. I had meant to answer up, but I suddenly found that my mouth had gone dry. A sort of hot and cold feeling ran up and down my spine, meanwhile I could hear the others shuffling about on deck. It sounded as if there were quite a number of them. I suddenly had a feeling of panic. The feeling that we were absolutely isolated, miles from even the most lonely and desolate bit of coast.

I suppose it can only have been a matter of seconds, but thoughts flashed through my mind. Useless thoughts, help-
less thoughts. I wondered what the Admiral was doing, whether he was in bed. What Squadron Leader Turnbull

would look like if he cut off his handlebars. Heaven knew where Jenkins and Juliet had got to. Their names both began with J. Funny, I hadn't thought of that before.

"Well?" he repeated. And I realised that his ruthless looking face was turned on me.

Susan was the first to speak. Her voice sounded marvellous, an absolute tonic.

"Good evening, Mr. Batt," she replied calmly. "I'm sorry you find us so late on board here. We came over for a friendly visit, but something seems to have happened to our dinghy . . ."

"It has," he replied in an icy voice. "We've picked it up. We found it drifting about two miles astern. At least I presume it must be yours. Can't you even make fast your boat?"

My God, that's torn it, I thought. The only thing to do now is to get back to our ship if we can. I wonder what on earth can have happened. I suppose that ass Jenkins never made it fast. I was just about to suggest our going back when he forestalled me by saying:

"Now perhaps you will be good enough to be gone."

"Why are you in such a foul temper?" answered Susan fiercely. "You're up to no good, that's what's wrong with you. You're up to no good. Who are these people on deck?"

"That's none of your business," he replied, advancing slowly towards her.

She gave a quick sideways glance at the door to the focsle, as if hoping for some line of escape, and half rose to her feet, but Maitland was in the way.

"Leave her alone," I called. "If you dare to touch her, you'll regret it." My voice sounded far away as if it was echoing down a long tunnel.

He swivelled at once in my direction. "And who do you think you are, giving orders in my ship?" He advanced

towards me, but this time it was Susan who diverted his attention.

"We are not going until we know who you've got on deck."

I could still hear the stamping of feet somewhere over our heads, and some muffled shouts or words of command. It sounded as if they must be hoisting the motor boat, or getting under way. I suddenly realised there was nothing really to stop them sailing off. By the morning we would be well out to sea, and by the time Jenkins and Juliet had got back to harbour and raised the alarm, we would be half way across the North Sea.

He was standing there keenly alert and watching for any move on our part. I had never really noticed him much. He had seemed a dour and uncommunicative person, whenever I had met him, but this was the first time I realised what he was really like. I wondered whether he was going to strike me. He was certainly a tough looking customer, and looked a great deal stronger than I had noticed before.

At the sound of Susan's defiant voice he slowly turned in her direction again and stood there. He was stooping slightly, presumably so as not to bump his head against the beams, but it seemed to emphasise his height. I found myself wishing that Susan had brought her Very light pistol with her, but in fact we had no arms at all. We had rashly relied on surprising these people, but it hadn't worked out. I suppose my last-minute change of plan had been a mistake. If I had gone back for Jenkins, I would have taken damned good care we didn't lose the dinghy. I remembered with a sickening feeling my forebodings of the evening before as we were so gaily and cheerfully sailing round in the *Fame*. It had seemed an exciting adventure then, but all I could do now was to curse myself for not having heeded the warning. I always felt there would be trouble

with the *Dragonfly*. Right at the beginning when I first found the girls mixed up in their smuggling, I sensed there was danger here. What a fool I had been.

I came to with a start. Batt was speaking.

"So that's how it is. You are interested in our passengers, eh? You won't leave until you've seen them. Is that it? Very well. Have it your own way, then.

"Maitland, you'd better pull yourself together," he said contemptuously, "and get the ship under way. There is no point in our hanging round here. Let's have as many miles as we can between ourselves and this place by daybreak. Come on, man, wake up! What's come over you?"

His voice rose as Maitland got to his feet and slunk up on deck like a dog that had just been whipped.

"Well?" he said, looking contemptuously first at me and then at Susan.

"You can't do this," I protested. "Put us back on board the *Fame* at once, or if you've got our dinghy, let us row back ourselves."

"But this young woman demanded to stay. You'd better make up your minds what you do want to do. Better still, she can stay and satisfy her curiosity and you can go. That should satisfy you both. I hadn't thought of that solution." He laughed unpleasantly. "Yes, that's what we'll do."

"You can't do this," I repeated.

"Oh, and who is to stop me?"

"This is ridiculous," I said, springing to my feet. "I'm not standing for this."

"Stop! Stop where you are at once," he commanded.

Quick as a flash he had me covered and I found myself staring down the barrel of a small pistol. I gazed at it in a helpless sort of way, feeling as if it were mesmerising me. The little hole at the end seemed to get larger and smaller. I couldn't take my eyes off it. I remained motion-

less, listening to the noises on deck. Outside the saloon door someone had started up the motor. The Kelvin, I thought, as I listened to its quiet rhythmical beat. Someone was working the winch and making the whole boat shake as the cable came inboard.

"Get over to where your friend is," he ordered. "And you had better keep your hands up."

He backed into the doorway to let me pass, keeping me carefully covered as I edged over to where Susan sat. I had no sooner got there when there was a sort of dull thud and he sank to his knees and flopped unconscious to the floor. There, stooping over him, stood Jenkins. I could hardly believe my eyes.

"Puffin!" exclaimed Susan in a hushed voice. "Thank heavens you've got him."

"Ssh!" he said, holding up his finger.

"How in heaven's name did you get here?" I asked, bounding forward.

"Quick," he said, "there's no time to lose." He pushed the unconscious Batt into the saloon and closed the door.

"Now," he said, "you'd better take this pistol, Sir, we may have some trouble with the others, and you, Susan, pop your head cautiously into the focsle and tell Juliet to come out. She should be hiding right up forward."

In a moment a somewhat dishevelled Juliet had joined us.

"Where on earth were you hiding?" I asked Jenkins.

"For heaven's sake, not so loud," he cautioned. "I was in the oilskin locker just outside. We managed to get on board when you were here with Maitland."

"We've got the worst one out of the way," I replied.

"Yes, but we had better bind him up. Juliet, nip back into the focsle and get some rope."

She returned a moment later with the lead line.

"That'll do fine," he said.

In a few minutes we had our late aggressor firmly bound and gagged with a mouth full of cotton waste and hidden under the table. So far he hadn't stirred.

"I hope I haven't killed him," said Jenkins. "I'm afraid I may have hit a bit hard."

"Never mind about him!" said Susan. "He's a brute, but how about the others?"

As far as we could tell from the noises on deck, they were still getting under way. We were just considering what to do next when we heard someone coming down the ladder.

"Quick," said Jenkins, "sit round as if nothing had happened."

I noticed that he had hidden his revolver inside his coat, so I did the same. We could hear someone fumbling clumsily for the handle outside. Then it turned, and the door opened cautiously, and in stepped a somewhat shifty looking man with grey hair and thick glasses. He stood blinking for a moment in the light. I realised at once that he must be Julius, but he looked old and tired.

"Can I come in?" he said in a voice which sounded slightly foreign.

"Certainly, Sir," said Jenkins cheerfully. "Come in by all means, and take a seat. Make yourself at home."

I rose and closed the door behind him.

"Who are you?" continued Jenkins, turning suddenly more stern.

The man twisted himself round as if he had a stiff neck and peered curiously at Jenkins.

"Me?" he said, with a note of suspicion. "I'm Alfred Julius. But who are all these people? I don't understand."

He sounded bewildered.

"What are you doing?" He rose up to go.

"Stay where you are," advised Jenkins, pulling out his revolver. "Now, we are not going to hurt you, but we have to take precautions. If you make any noise—well—it will be your fault."

The Professor's jaws opened and he gulped, but made no protest.

"You keep him covered, will you, Sir," he said to me. "And Juliet, how about the rest of the lead line?"

In a couple of minutes we had his hands securely tied behind his back.

"Now don't forget," warned Jenkins, "any nonsense and you'll go over the side. You just sit quietly in that corner and you'll be all right."

There was a hail from up forward, and we heard the engine alter its note as it was slipped into gear and took the load.

"We are under way," said Susan.

"That's all right," replied Jenkins. "There are only two of them on deck as far as I know. One at the wheel, I suppose, and the other securing up forward. Now I am going to hide in the alley-way again among the oil skins, and you, Susan, go up on deck and tell Maitland that Batt wants him in the saloon. You can say he is in a temper. He won't have time to suspect anything because I will be right behind him as he comes in."

There was a heavy groan from the floor.

"I think we had better get that fellow up on one of the bunks first," said Jenkins. "I don't want him to die on us."

While Juliet kept the Professor under cover, the rest of us gathered round the still unconscious figure of Batt, and pulled him out from under the table. Even with three of us he was a heavy weight, but we managed to push him into one of the bunks, where we propped him on his side and then drew the curtain.

"Stand by for the next one," said Jenkins, as he left the saloon for his hiding place.

Susan followed him and climbed the ladder, while I shut the door again. Juliet and I looked across the little saloon at each other, listening intently. It sounded as if one of them anyhow was still rummaging about on the focsle. Probably still securing the anchor and cable, I thought.

"What happens if he comes down the forward way?" I asked.

"He can't," replied Juliet. "I've bolted the fore hatch."

We waited. Presumably Susan was trying to find out which was which. Presently we heard her call out. There was some sort of acknowledgment from up forward. Then we heard her telling Maitland that he was wanted in the saloon. We could hear him stumping along the deck in his heavy sea boots.

"What's the trouble?" he asked gruffly.

"Mr. Batt wants you in the saloon," we heard her reply. "He said at once."

There was a sort of grunt, and in a moment he was clattering noisily down the companion-way, and the door burst open. He stood there for a moment and then he crashed forward with Jenkins on top of him. Taken completely by surprise, he was securely pinioned in a moment. He made one frantic effort to dislodge Jenkins, who was sitting firmly on top of him, and then lay breathing heavily and muttering, "Get off, blast you."

Like Batt, we bound him hand and foot and gagged him most effectively. Indeed, I was a little doubtful if he could breathe.

The rest was comparatively easy. Jenkins went up on deck with Juliet. The paid hand was beginning to get a bit restive as they got up, obviously wondering what was going on.

"Anyone there?" he called.

"Yes," said Jenkins, "and what's more, I have you covered with a revolver. Stop the ship and come below or you'll get shot."

"Who the devil are you?" he exclaimed.

"Never you mind. You'd better do as I say. Your friends are down here and not likely to help you much."

There was no question about it and now our main concern "There," he said, "now you know I'm speaking the truth." There was a pause while he put the engine in neutral and the last of our opponents came slowly down below into the saloon.

It had all happened so quickly that I found myself wondering if there were any more of them, but apparently not. Evidently, with all their care and thoroughness, we had taken them completely by surprise. I suppose that out here, particularly on a night like this, it never occurred to them that they could be so completely overpowered. I could only suppose they had been doing this for some time, and had become over-confident. But anyhow there they were. There was no question about it and now our main concern was to get them back. Looking back over the night's events, there was no doubt that, in rounding these people up, Jenkins had handled the situation in a masterful way. We had been lucky too, extraordinarily lucky. One false move, one small misfortune, and we might have found ourselves in the unenviable position of being sailed off to the Soviet Union. Without anyone being the wiser.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE next problem that faced us was not without difficulty. There were four of us and four prisoners and two vessels. Clearly our first consideration was the security of those we had captured, and so we took good care to collect any revolvers we could find. Batt and Maitland had both been armed, but we couldn't find any other firearms. With Batt still more or less unconscious, and both he and Maitland securely lashed, we had the situation well in hand, or thought we had. The Professor sat there blinking and looking rather feeble, more like an old woman. However, we secured both him and the paid hand as thoroughly as we could, and in fact made a pretty good job of it. It would have been easier if there had been a chair or something solid to which we could have lashed them, but the padded settees and bunks seemed to offer nothing on these lines. So, selecting Maitland as the most likely to give trouble, we locked him in the focsle. We then considered our next move.

The *Dragonfly* was, of course, still under weigh, and although she was lying stopped, she was drifting with the current. Looking back on it, there is no doubt that the sensible thing would have been to have steamed straight back, then and there, in the *Dragonfly*. But the trouble which faced us was the fact that we had left *Fame* riding very insecurely to a warp. If we had left her like that and it freshened she would very soon have gone adrift, and might have become a total loss. We considered the possibility of sailing her back, but it seemed unwise to split up. And so

we decided that one of us should go over and secure the ship properly so that we could, anyhow, leave her for a few hours with some degree of confidence.

Exactly how our misfortune occurred is a bit of a mystery, but the excitement was wearing off and we were all feeling the effects of an anticlimax, and I suppose we were off our guard. Anyway, having secured our prisoners, I was under the impression that we had left Juliet in charge, but apparently she had already gone up on deck. We had in fact just hoisted out the motor boat, and Jenkins was helping Susan to get it started. If I remember right, I was passing down the oars when I heard a terrific splash by the stern of the vessel, and the next moment I received a violent shove, and found myself crashing head forward into the boat. Fortunately I fell right on top of Jenkins, otherwise I might well have broken my neck. I remember hearing a few shouted orders and the next thing we knew was that the *Dragonfly* was steaming off into the darkness.

We had certainly had the tables turned on us. The splash I had heard had been Juliet, and our first thought was to rescue her. Poor girl, we hauled her on board looking more like a drowned rat. She had been less fortunate than I and had apparently caught herself on some projection, probably a guard rail stanchion. Anyway, her trousers were badly torn and she had an ugly gash above the knee. However, we were lucky to have suffered nothing worse.

Without waiting to argue about whose fault it was, we did the only thing left and rowed over to the *Fame*. It seemed to me that we simply must get ashore and let the authorities know as soon as possible. In this calm foggy weather, we would take ages trying to get the *Fame* round under sail, and after a quick discussion it was clear that our best plan was to send a party ashore in the *Dragonfly's*

motor boat. We would be unlikely to find our way into Denghie Marsh in the dark, and in any case the tide would be too low. We therefore had a quick look at the chart and considered the possibility of running the boat up to Brightlingsea, the next nearest place, but it seemed rather remote. Besides which, it would probably be quicker to wait until daybreak, and then find our way in on the rising tide.

Poor Juliet, we had just managed to get her out of her wet clothes, when she fainted right out. Her leg didn't appear to be too bad, but I had no doubt that it had given her a bit of a shock. We bandaged it roughly with a towel and wrapped her in a blanket. After which a tot of rum soon restored some colour to her cheeks.

"Well, we are a crowd of blockheads," I commented, feeling somewhat relieved that nothing worse had come about. "How on earth did it all happen?"

The stove was fortunately still alight, and we soon had it stoked up and put a kettle on while we discussed how we had slipped up.

It sounds pretty elementary now. We should, of course, have mounted an armed guard and made absolutely sure that there was no misunderstanding. But the fact that they were all trussed like turkey cocks, with Batt unconscious and Maitland locked in the focsle, a momentary absence of a guard seemed hardly enough to facilitate their escape like that. They had certainly been remarkably quick. I can only imagine that either the paid hand must have got hold of a knife and quickly set himself and the others free, or else that Batt may have been partly shamming, and may have had a knife hidden somewhere at the side of his bunk.

But I think the most likely solution was that Maitland, worming his way round in the darkness of the focsle, had managed to get a knife there, out of the bo'sn's locker, then having set himself free, he could, of course, unbolt the

focsl hatch and come on deck that way. Seeing the two of us leaning over the rail, he had quite possibly done the whole thing single-handed. It had been a fatal mistake locking him in up forward.

However, it was no use crying over spilt milk. Now that we had got Juliet in better shape our next task was to get the motor boat started. Up on deck it was beginning to get light, and we passed some petrol down and set to work. It was easier now that it was not quite so dark, and we soon had her running.

It seemed to me that the best plan was to leave Jenkins on board to look after Juliet and to anchor the ship properly while Sue and I tried to find our way inshore. I had a feeling that I wanted to ring up Captain Thoroughgood. I felt very guilty at not having let him know before, but somehow it never seemed quite the moment. However, if I could get through to him now, and explain personally what had happened, I was sure he would be sympathetic. He would not, of course, be at the Admiralty at that hour, but fortunately I had his home number and I could get him there.

Gulping down the hot drink we had prepared, and wishing the others good luck, we dropped down into the boat and cast off. As soon as she was in the boat Susan produced a small prismatic compass and fixed it on the seat. At her suggestion we proceeded due west till we got into very shallow water, and then, turning south, we felt our way slowly along with the aid of one of the oars, keeping in just enough water to float the boat. It took us some considerable time. The weather was still thick and we could see nothing except occasionally the faintest suggestion of the edge of the water lapping along the mud. But it may have been imagination.

Presently, however, we found we were edging more to the west, and had some difficulty in regaining the shoal

water. This was evidently the entrance to the little creek, and still using the paddle to sound with, we followed it in. The channel twisted and turned a good deal and in spite of following Susan's directions as carefully as I could, we touched bottom several times. However, the tide was flooding, and we soon found that we had the mud rising on either hand. After that we came to the saltings and the creek opened out into quite a pool. Above it there was not enough water, and I made an abortive attempt to get ashore, but I sank straight into the mud and had to struggle back into the boat.

We had to wait about an hour before proceeding. Fortunately Susan had stuffed her pockets with biscuits, and also produced some slabs of chocolate which we munched while we waited.

It was a deserted and lonely place, except for the marsh birds who every now and then opened up on some piping note. After that we continued on in and eventually, by dint of a good deal of prodding, I found a place where I could struggle ashore. Carrying my clothes above my head to keep them dry, I waded. It was cold work at that hour, but it was quite firm when I clambered up on to the sedge and tussock.

It seemed to me that the best plan was to leave Susan in charge of the boat, to keep it afloat while I went inland. Pulling on my clothes, I continued on by myself. I was still some way out, and it consisted mostly of jumping from one clump to the next. However, I eventually gained the sea wall, and was able to step out more briskly. I thought of old Jenkins flopping face foremost into the morass, and was glad that I had negotiated it more successfully. Then I passed the place where I had been startled by the old cow in the moonlight. I came to the farmstead. It was close on seven by then and the dog was barking furiously.

With some misgivings, I knocked at the door and it was opened by the farmer's wife—a young woman with rather pleasing features. She looked somewhat surprised. "My! you've been in the mud," she said. But I explained that my boat had broken down out there. It was near enough to the truth, and she let me use the telephone.

I had some difficulty in getting through to Captain Thoroughgood, but eventually a somewhat startled voice answered. It was his wife, but she went back and roused the Captain. It was no good mincing matters, and I explained to him as quickly as I could just what had happened.

He evidently realised I was bitterly disappointed, and attempted to reassure me. "Never mind, David, we'll get those bastards fixed up somehow. We'll get an M.T.B. after them. I'll ring off now and get straight round to the Admiralty. I'll be there in half an hour. They won't get all that far, and we'll lay on an air search. But how about yourselves? Do you want a boat sent round to tow you in?"

"Oh, no, Sir," I replied. "We're all right. Now that you've got the matter in hand the best thing we can do, I think, is to get our boat back to West Mersea, and get our casualty attended to."

He agreed, and I rang off and set out on my way back. Susan had managed to get the boat a good deal further in on the rising tide, and I was glad to be able to get on board without having to wade again. We had no great difficulty in leaving the creek. Now that Susan had showed how it could be done, it seemed quite simple. While I had been away she had made a number of marks on the oar to serve as a sounding pole to make it easier. As soon as we got into deeper water, we stood out on an easterly course till we picked up the shoal water along the edge of the Buxey and, working our way to the north, we presently found

ourselves quite close to the beacon itself, a great weathered baulk of timber sticking up in the air, with seaweed growing near the water's edge and a gaunt looking top mark overhead. We turned north, and were soon back to our ship.

I was glad to note that Juliet seemed a good deal better and was in fact up and about, having dressed her wound. We lost no time in weighing and as there was little if any wind, we tried towing with the *Dragonfly's* motor boat. It was a slow process, but we managed about two and a half knots, until the engine began to run hot. After that we gave it a rest and drifted on under sail with barely steerage way. However, we eventually got into Mersea quarters, where we anchored and went ashore.

As soon as we had got up to the Admiral's house, I rang through again. I felt dog tired, having had no sleep since the night before, and a good deal of excitement and disappointment. I told the Captain and he advised me to turn in. The matter was well in hand, he said, but they were handicapped by fog. He promised to ring back as soon as anything happened. Meanwhile I was to get my sleep and return to the Admiralty later.

Next day we all felt a good deal better after our night's rest, although we were still very disappointed at the outcome of events.

"Well, so much for 'Coverplan'," commented Jenkins in a resigned tone of voice.

"'Coverplan'?" enquired the girls. "What's that?"

"Oh, well," I said, "it has become quite a long and complicated story by now. Puffin has, I think, told you quite a bit about what we've been doing already, but you may remember that some time ago there was a—well—a little bit of trouble with your friends in the *Dragonfly*, and I was a bit worried that you might be getting mixed up with them in one way or another. Perhaps you remember my warning

you. Anyhow, when I heard that you had actually seen her alongside a Russian coaster, I began to sit up and take notice. I started making official enquiries at the Admiralty, and in the end Jenkins and I were detailed off to find out what we could. It became quite an obsession with me for a time, but try as hard as we could, we were never able to fasten anything on them. You two girls were really the only witnesses—er—reliable witnesses, I had. Puffin here, if I remember correctly, was a bit sceptical as to your reliability.”

“But didn’t you report all this to the police?” asked Juliet.

“Yes, as a matter of fact we did, but, of course, as far as you two girls were concerned, I had to be rather more careful. You see, I thought they might perhaps draw the wrong conclusions.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Jenkins.

“Well, that’s really another story, but most families have a black sheep. I can only say this family has two. They are both here. But, anyhow, the reason they were so quick to help you, Jenkins, was because they already had their own doubts about the *Dragonfly*.”

“What did the police do when you told them?” asked Juliet.

“We didn’t exactly tell them, but we laid a kind of police trap for these people near Denghie Flats to try to catch them, or anyhow find out if they were up to anything there.”

“Did you have any luck?”

“Not really. We flushed a party out wild fowling. But except for the fact that they were shooting out of season there was nothing irregular. Your Puffin here was chased by a dog.” I looked at Jenkins. “A large and ferocious beast, but he managed to elude its jaws by diving head

foremost into the mud. You should have seen him. Mud! I've never seen anything like it—covered with it from head to foot. In his eyes, ears and everywhere.”

“Good gracious!” said Juliet. “Poor old Puffin—what an unpleasant adventure. What was it, do you think? A mastiff?”

“Well, as a matter of fact we thought it must be something of the sort, but we discussed that afterwards with the police who saw the dog, and came to the conclusion that it must have been a spaniel.”

“Puffin! Do you mean that you did all this just because you saw an ordinary old spaniel?”

“Actually,” he stammered, “it wasn’t the dog that frightened me. I was afraid of being discovered. But I admit that I did make rather an ass of myself; anyhow, after that I was determined to get my own back. And somehow the more I thought over all this, the more convinced I became that it needed following up. You remember, Sir,” he continued, turning to me, “that they were pretty sceptical about all this in the Admiralty. Specially after they had seen the police report.”

“Yes,” I replied. “I’m afraid I rather lost heart myself after that, but for some reason Puffin became more than ever convinced, and seems to have been carrying on all manner of investigations on his own. Visits to Ostend, Le Touquet, Fécamp, and goodness knows where. I wouldn’t like to enquire too deeply into his activities, but he’s been like a bloodhound with his nose to the trail. Haven’t you, Puffin?”

“Well, Sir, as I explained to you earlier on, I attended the police court and listened to the case being tried, and it seemed a pity to leave it at that. As far as the Court was concerned, those fellows we flushed out wild fowling were fined about a fiver each for poaching, and that was that.

But what caught my attention was the fact that they said they were supplying the 'Blue Angel'."

"The Blue Angel?" asked Juliet.

"The Blue Angel. I thought you two would know it. It's a sort of restaurant just off Knightsbridge. Quite a fashionable place."

"More likely to be one of your haunts," she replied, "but go on. Don't stop, this is most intriguing."

"As a matter of fact I'd never been there, but I thought I'd better look in on the place just in case. And then I took rather a liking to it, and used to have lunch there quite regularly. It wasn't particularly convenient, but I rather hoped that I might pick up some further clue one day."

"And did you?" she asked eagerly.

"Well, I took careful note of all the people who came in. Some pretty odd types among them. I suppose I'd been doing this for about a fortnight when I succeeded in identifying one of the more regular customers as Batt."

"Batt!" they both exclaimed.

"Yes. I thought that would interest you," he added triumphantly. "You see, this was the first direct connection I managed to discover between the *Dragonfly* and the wild fowls of Denghie marsh. Of course, I suspected that they were in league, but that wasn't good enough."

"But how did you know it was Batt?" asked Juliet.

"Well, we have our ways of checking and identifying people," said Jenkins smugly.

"Do tell us," she insisted. "I always wonder how on earth they do these things."

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid it's confidential."

"Well, how about all this business over at Frinton then? I suppose that was confidential too?"

"Yes, very," I put in. "Top secret, I should call it, but anyway, you'd better tell the girls the rest of the story."

"But I still don't see why you didn't report all this to the police," insisted Juliet.

"Well, Juliet, that's just the trouble. We should have done so, at any rate, we should have called in M.I.5, or the Special Branch."

"But why didn't you?"

I paused for a moment. "If we had done that, they would have found out all about your smuggling."

"Oh, but Uncle David," exclaimed Juliet. "It's a shame if we've got you into trouble over that. I thought that was finished. We'd feel miserable that it was our fault. But what can we do? Can't we own up?"

"Heavens no! It's too late anyhow. I shan't get into trouble really. I was passed over for promotion several years ago in any case. It was just that—well—when all this came along, I just thought it might turn out to be one of those lucky chances that you sometimes read about. But really I would much rather be cruising about with you two young monkeys than sweating around trying to get promoted."

The telephone rang and I went to the receiver. "This may be some news."

I listened for a few moments to a series of clicks and then I heard Captain Thoroughgood's voice. Apparently the search had not been possible owing to the continued and widespread fog. But, late last night, Commander in Chief Nore had intercepted a message from a fishing vessel called *Morning Light*, saying that they had found the yacht *Dragonfly* in a derelict condition somewhere well out in the North Sea.

"Anyone on board?" I asked.

"No, apparently not," he replied. "She appears to have been more or less in a sinking condition when they found her. They tried to tow her back, but sometime during the night she foundered. We intercepted *Morning Lights*

message on her radio telephone again this morning, just as I was setting out to come down to you."

And that, I am afraid, really ends the story. A bit disappointing, but there it is. If I had been writing a thriller, I suppose we would have had a dramatic finish, ending with a fight to the death on board *Dragonfly*, Jenkins being slowly throttled by Batt, saved just in the nick of time by Juliet and Susan cracking the villain on the head with a beer bottle, and so on. But it just didn't work out that way. How or why *Dragonfly* became derelict, who she had on board, and what became of them remains a mystery. Perhaps she met with a mishap. Or perhaps this was planned to be her last trip, and they transferred to some other vessel. These were questions on which we could only conjecture.

"How about Marcelle?" asked Juliet after a bit.

Jenkins looked up at her and paused for a moment. "I had an idea that you might ask that. Well, I expect that she is still going strong. No doubt they will have her watched, but you see there is nothing against her, and they can't make her talk, even if she did know what had happened."

"I think you are really rather fond of her," she commented.

He laughed, but made no reply. Then he looked at the girls and said, "Yes, and what I would like to know is what has been going on between you and the *Dragonfly*." He looked round, but they remained silent.

"I think I had better explain that," I replied, intervening in the conversation. "The fact is that when I first came down to these parts, Jenkins, I found these two girls—young

and honest looking, respectable family and so on—engaged up to the hilt in an international smuggling organisation. Sufficient, I should have thought, to have made even Marcelle blush.”

“How can you, Uncle David,” exclaimed the girls. “You know perfectly well that you were just as bad yourself. He actually helped us bring over the biggest haul of the lot. Didn’t you, Uncle David? Own up.”

“Well, I’m damned!” exclaimed Jenkins, seizing his chance. “I seem to be the only honest member of this party. You surprise me. Here I was putting on my best behaviour, imagining you two girls innocent, sweet young things, while all the time you have been acting as a brace of gansters’ molls to Batt and the other fellow. Good gracious! Talk about Marcelle. It seems to me that this is far worse . . .”

“What are you going to do now?” asked Susan, trying to change the subject.

“Juliet is coming up to town with me,” declared Jenkins firmly.

“Oh, am I?” she replied. “Who said?”

“I shall need you—er—for further interrogation,” he answered, putting his hand on her shoulder and giving her a mischievous look. “That is, if you feel like it.”

“Very good, Puffin,” she replied, and then, looking in Susan’s direction, she added, “but I won’t guarantee to give all the answers you want.”

We rose and started to sort out our gear and rearrange our plans. I hoped that after an evening out, Jenkins and Juliet might return, and that we would perhaps have another party next week-end. But somehow I felt that the team was beginning to break up.

An hour or so later we gathered round Jenkins’ car and watched them climb in, not knowing quite what to say.

There was the usual detonation from somewhere beneath the vehicle, and off they went. Juliet turned round and waved cheerfully, but in a moment they disappeared round a bend in the road. I stood for some moments lost in my thoughts, and realised that I, too, would have to start off for Town. I turned to Susan, but she had gone. I hunted round the house wondering what had become of her, and then hurried down to the hard. As I came in sight of the little jetty I saw her standing there gazing out to sea, a lonely figure with her oilskins flung over her shoulder. I paused, uncertain what I should do. Then she continued on down to where the dinghy lay half afloat on the incoming tide.

"Susan," I called. "Susan!" But she made no reply. Perhaps she hadn't heard. I called again, but by that time she had scrambled into the boat and was rowing out into the anchorage.

with corrections to 1957

The Topography is taken from the Ordnance Survey

Soundings refer to the True Soundings and are given from Lowest Tide (LW) (24/24)

Uncharted depths on drying banks and rocks express the height in feet above the datum to which the soundings are reduced

All other heights are expressed in feet above High Water Springs

For abbreviations see Admiralty Chart 501

Historical scale 1:50,000

SOUNDINGS IN FATHOMS

(Under 1' given in Fathoms & Feet)

Projections - Mercator

SEE CAUTIONARY NOTES

CONVERSION TABLE		METERS									
FATHOMS	FEET	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
		0.5	1.0	1.5	2.0	2.5	3.0	3.5	4.0	4.5	5.0
1	6	1.1	1.8	2.4	3.0	3.7	4.3	5.0	5.6	6.3	7.0
2	12	1.8	3.0	4.0	4.9	5.8	6.7	7.6	8.5	9.4	10.4
3	18	2.4	4.0	5.5	6.4	7.3	8.2	9.1	10.0	10.9	11.9
4	24	3.0	5.0	7.0	8.0	9.0	10.0	11.0	12.0	13.0	14.0
5	30	3.7	6.0	8.5	9.8	11.0	12.2	13.4	14.6	15.8	17.0
6	36	4.3	7.0	10.0	11.3	12.5	13.7	14.9	16.1	17.3	18.5
7	42	5.0	8.0	11.5	12.8	14.0	15.2	16.4	17.6	18.8	20.0
8	48	5.6	9.0	13.0	14.3	15.5	16.7	17.9	19.1	20.3	21.5
9	54	6.3	10.0	14.5	15.8	17.0	18.2	19.4	20.6	21.8	23.0
10	60	7.0	11.0	16.0	17.3	18.5	19.7	20.9	22.1	23.3	24.5



